

The turn of the century, maybe? Deliver my father into the millenium he was forever trying to get to with his deals? “I hadn’t decided on the exact, uhm, getting at it.”

He knew she was itchy to head back to Seattle, and that would take care of putting off the ash chore for this summer. “Sometime when life lets up a little bit we can figure that out, don’t you think?”

“What I was thinking is tomorrow.”

Mitch made a skittish motion downward with his forefinger as if pressing a dreaded button. “*Tomorrow* tomorrow?”

“Why not? We’re here handy to the mountains. We could use a break from this house, that’s for sure.” The way she was reeling off reasons, it seemed to him, she could have printed up the Lyle Rozier Memorial Hike as a brochure. “The streams are down some this time of year, when it comes to wading. It could snow up in there, any time beginning in August. So I figure right away--like tomorrow--makes sense.” She cocked a look at him. “Only a thought.”

It inescapably was mental material, all right. Mitch tried to digest the notion of starting out up the pyramid slopes of the continent not all that many hours from now. Sixty miles of fresh air, some of it pretty thin.

“Just like that, though?” he objected to her hit-the-trail mode. Looming over him at least as significantly as those mountains was the fact that the more and more un-ignorable gravel deal needed dealing with. He kept away from that with Lexa now by indicating vaguely around the Rozier place. “I mean, there’s still the upstairs to sort out, and something to be done with the ever-popular branding irons.”

“Mitch, this stuff isn’t going to trot off out of here.”

“Mariah theoretically is. Weren’t you going to get her and her wide world of belongings moved tomorrow?”

Lexa didn’t even have to lift her hat to swat that away.

”No problem. She has that museum gig in the Falls she’s been putting off. I’ll tell her I have to run in there anyway this afternoon, she can get packed up and come along. That way I can pick up trail gear for us.” She checked Mitch with something like dubious hope. “Do you have any at all, in everything else there is around here?”

“I’ll have you know I have—” he had to think before defensively coming up with “—boots. And maybe socks.”

“Right, Rambo of the Rockies.” She patted her pockets and then his for something to start making a list on.

He provided her with a half-used pad of stickits. Then reached out and cupped her chin, bringing her face up to let this register. "You're revved to get into those mountains, aren't you."

To his surprise, she reddened in a shy way. She pushed both hands back through her hair, the sunlight warming its copper hue. "Really am." She glanced in the direction of Phantom Woman and the rest of the spinnaker pinnacles and blocky thrown-dice summits of the Rockies and spent a moment savoring the skyline congregation. Then laughed a little. "Been a while." Alaska, and the Exxon Valdez spill, and the crackup with Travis, and the long mend with Mitch, all had happened since she had been into the mountains of the Two Medicine country.

Now she was gazing back at him with open curiosity. Half a dozen years with him and she still was trying to learn to read between his lines.

"Mitch? You okay with this?"

"Not particularly," he let it gust out of him.

Beyond that he felt it was too complicated for words: his father's absence seemed so prominent it was a stand-in for his presence. As though no inch of territory around Lyle, past or present, could ever be neutral: either Lyle was going to be hugely there or hugely not there, take your choice. Mitch felt Lexa's gaze still on him. The best he could

give her was quirked bemusement with himself and his burden of ashes. "But flinch and bear it, right?"

Lexa's van entered the driveway with an eager washing-machine roar, Mariah returning from her photographic scavenger hunt.

When the van door slammed decisively, Lexa called: "We're around back, in the used-equipment dealership."

Mariah picked her way to them. "Hi, gang. Another mission of focus-pocus accomplished." She looked worn down to her socks but persevering. After the long siege of Lyle's illness and the emotional drain of being around death, all three of them must look something like that, Mitch reflected. He watched her put down her camera bag like a traveler at the end of an extended journey.

"When are your pictures of my dad going to run, do you think?"

Mariah gave him an odd look and said, "Some slow week. You know editors."

"Cover your ears, Lexa, I'm going to say something nice about your sister."

"Don't, you'll spoil the kid," Lexa warned with a grin.

Her arms crossed, Mariah stood and watched Mitch, looking medium wary.

"I never thought I'd be saying so," he brought out, "but your pictures *are* my father. For better or worse." Seeing the whole portfolio for the first time last night, he and

Lexa both had exclaimed time and again at Lyle to ~~the~~ life: sniffing, sneaking that extra air in; or pooching out his lower lip, dubious of everything over the horizon; even when he was at his most parade-ground grand, watching himself go by, her shutter click caught him against the hard soil of age. Unsparing but heartcatching, Mariah's camerawork. Mitch smiled congratulations at her. "You nailed him."

"Just about." She gave her head a shake that rattled her cut-glass earrings.

Mitch and Lexa glanced at each other. Her gallery of Lyles, they both figured, likely outnumbered Matthew Brady's of the whole Civil War.

"Kind of late to be second-guessing, isn't it?" Lexa pointed out, not unkindly.

"Yeah, really," Mitch began, "you bagged him in every conceivable--"

"I still need the right shot of you," Mariah was saying impatiently, "spreading his ashes on Phantom Woman. That's what he told me he wanted, you know."

two

In an almost cryogenic state of cool at getting to palm the wheel of the rattly retired Forest Service pickup, Matthew Brainerd had driven them to the trailhead next to Agency Lake earliest that morning, hung around restlessly while they checked over their packs, then took off back down the one-lane gravel in a road warrior's plume of dust.

"I hope he knows the meaning of a week," Mitch said, watching him go.

"Did you when you were sixteen?" was Mariah's contribution.

"He'll be back for us okay," Lexa said absently, tying on a Sierra cup with a little length of parachute cord so it would bang on her pack/frame as a noise against bears. "I threatened to hack his home page if he screws up on the time."

Their packs were leaned against old stumps on the lakeshore like bulging creatures after a meal. They had gear and more gear. Nice new nylon tents, a change of clothing apiece, extra socks, sweatshirts for warmth, rainjackets that would double as windshells. Caps, dark glasses, sun block, moleskin. Candle lantern and pencil-sized flashlight. Binoculars, smallest pair possible. Toothbrushes with the handles sawn off. Waterproof container with pitch firestarter and matches. Lexa's sleek little Bleuet camp stove and sufficient butane cartridges. Food, much food.

When they helped ^{one another} each other heft into their pack straps, Mitch in particular appeared laden, his pack threatening to tip him over onto his back like a beetle. Lexa had had to buy him an extra-large sleeping bag called the Big and Tall model, and since it was too bulky to ride at the bottom of his packframe it had to be strapped atop. Now she took an inspecting look at him, top-heavy as a moonwalker, and for the first time in years had a pang for Travis and his nature-boy fit into the outdoors.

Mariah was going with what she insisted was an absolute basic irreducible minimum of photographic apparatus, which included a tripod and two spare cameras and enough film to send Fuji stock up.

Lexa resolutely reviewed her trail troops. *Could be worse* ^{he} *at least left Lyle's desk home and she didn't bring her darkroom.* Despite her own hefty enough pack she

could have charged off into the mountains at a high trot. This was always a moment she loved: the pumped readiness as she jockeyed in the saddle before the start of a barrel race; the palette of food made by her own hands gloriously ready to meet the partycomers; the minute before setting boot onto trail. Right this instant she felt something like a hum of delight circling through her, a neural scat melody that seemed to break out into the air when a redwing blackbird flew from the top of a willow near them, its chevrons bright against the limestone palisade of Jericho Reef.

She reminded herself to throttle down; [↑] there were three days of footsteps ahead to the Divide, ^{along with} one trail companion who was not exactly a lean whippet of the highlands and another with about the same attention span as her shutter speed. [↓] Trying not to ~~make it~~ ^{make it} sound doubtful, she asked:

“Ready?”

“Red-*aye*,” Mitch proclaimed, giving her a game little salute.

“Anytime,” said Mariah, buckling the belt strap of her pack like a gunfighter.

~~##~~ There was a scatter of trails near the lake, ^a ₁ delta of footsteps before geography narrowed the choice. Jericho Reef steadily stood on its head in the lake’s mirror of water, a perfect unwavering stalactite of itself, as they threaded along the shore, Lexa in the lead

by unspoken vote. Shortly she was pointing left, where the trail turned up Agency Creek, and that quick they were into the first of the funneling valleys, the flumes of the continental drainage. The top flap pocket of Lexa's pack held three transparent waterproof packets, each with a U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle map folded with a day's traced-in-red route showing out. Today's crawl-line of trail angled behind the length of Jericho and led on into the mountains beyond the north rampart of neighboring Roman Reef, less arduous than tackling the canyon between the huge shields of stone straight on.

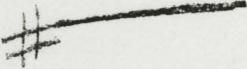
Even this junior valley, however, was so deeply cut that its walls dictated when the trail would be allowed on one side of the creek or the other. Not more than an hour after leaving the lake, they had to cross Agency Creek in water uncomfortably far up their thighs, water swift enough that to stay on their feet they had to lean into the current like slow, slow prowlers.

Seeing both Lexa and Mariah sit down on the bank, remove their boots and take out the insoles, take off their socks, then put their boots back on to cross the rock-bottomed creek, Mitch had followed their example.

When they booted up for real again on the opposite bank he felt almost pathetically grateful for the solace of dry socks and insoles.

Before resuming on the trail the three of them stood and gazed up at the formationed mountainsides virtually overhead, reefs and deeps like an ocean tipped empty and left on its side. Agency Creek, all the creek any of them wanted to have to tackle in one wading lifetime, skittered between these skyscraping valley walls.

Then the *clong* of Lexa's cup in rhythm against her packframe was leading them onto the narrow table of trail ahead.



They forded the obstinate creek twice more that morning, wet blue jeans and clammy loins convincing them lunch was deserved at the last ford.

Packs were shed gratefully, even by Lexa. Mariah and Mitch chorused that the cheese and crackers, cherries, and banana chips she passed around were easily the best food she had ever fixed. There was scenery to munch on, too. Drying out on the creek bank, they could see ahead through the turn of the valley to the mountains that carry the continent, dividing its waters and halving its scenery into the West and the rest.

Lexa zeroed in on the one that was central on the skyline.

"Phantom Woman," she said dreamily. "The great goat photo studio; Mariah McCaskill, girl proprietor."

"Career built on a golden stream, thanks to you."

"You're getting awful," Lexa laughed and flipped a banana chip at her.

"Did I miss a hairpin turn in the conversation?" Mitch wondered.

"Sister talk," Lexa told him as if it were higher physics, a flicker of commiserating grin coming his way from Mariah. This country was just west of childhood, for them.

Lexa the tomboy ranch kid then, and rambunctious big sister Mariah already halfway to another planet--Mariah maybe *was* another planet. Mitch hadn't a doubt that there were sibling zones no only child could penetrate.

"You brought *sheep* up in here, with your dad?" He had been trying to fathom low-slung wool-laden animals crisscrossing this creek that was close to hip-deep on him.

"We weren't in through here," the explanation came from Lexa. "this was Primitive Area even before Phantom Woman and the rest ever got set aside and they started calling the whole thing the Bob Wilderness. No mutton conductors allowed, orders of the Forest Service. So we trailed in south of here, along Roman Reef, didn't we, my ridin'-double sister."

"Wait a minute. There's an easier trail?"

"Longer. Not as interesting."

wimpy tenderfeet
 "For ~~sissies~~," Mariah put in with a straight face.

"Maybe I qualify," Mitch proposed. "How many tender feet does a guy have to have to apply?"

"Company," murmured Lexa, sharpest outdoor eyes among them. Mitch was sitting across from Mariah, and when she went rigidly still at the word he did too.

Fifty yards upstream the four-point buck deer, horns in velvet, stared at them in poised surprise. Then was gone in dolphin-like leaps into the brush.

3

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By early afternoon the creek was a wistful dabble behind and below them. The hike now was steadily up, across the shoulder of a high stony ridge. The Overthrust Belt, this sea of Rockies was called, a vast tectonic slosh that left behind rank after rank of tilted mountains, like frozen tidal waves aimed east toward the continental beach of plains. Cross one of these slabs of strata, and your reward was another of the alpine valleys raked into the geography by glaciers. But first you had to cross it. The three hikers now were spaced with great unevenness on the hard gray clay trail over the first of these mile-high^{long} upturns.

Mariah had taken the lead, launching off into a headstart so that she would have time near the top to scope around with her camera. A couple of hundred yards above Lexa now and letting out anti-bear yodels every so often, she was pushing herself in long

climbing steps that she would pay for in stiffness by tonight, but Lexa knew that was simply par for Mariah.

So, Lyle. Lexa allowed herself a little roving of her own. I never would have bet you had it in you. To pass up a townwide funeral for a procession like the three of us strung along this mountain. How ever Phantom Woman did it, she got hold of you for good.

Going up this sharply, Lexa loosened her bootlaces enough so her ankles could flex. That done, she concentrated on matching her breathing with her climbing stride, inhaling when she lifted her right leg, letting the breath out over the next step or two. How that rhythmic lungful of air within you could give the illusion of lift, she didn't know, only that it worked. Here on this high and starkly open section of the trail she had the same elevated feeling as being on horseback. The torso has memory, too. For one sweet selfish and quite guilty moment she let herself wish she was doing a high lonesome, up here. Solo, she could maintain the pace her exhilarated body wanted to reach for.

Mitch, though. A hundred yards behind her, and not noticeably keeping up. Apparently Mitch had not been put on earth to traverse mountains. Even from here she could see the dark wash of sweat on his shirt. Even as she watched, he sought a convenient boulder to sag onto and rest.

She half-jogged back down to where he had plopped.

“Getting your second wind?”

“I’m already on about my ninth,” he panted.

“You’ll toughen in. First day is the hardest.”

He devoutly hoped so. Too tired to crane around to see where Mariah had yo-yoed off to this time, he asked between breaths: “The roving photographer still roving, is she?”

“Yup.”

“You’re starting to talk like a backcountry guide, you know that?”

“Indubitably.”

“Tell me something. You’ve got some excuse for being good at this, from tromping around Alaska those years. Where does Mariah get it from?”

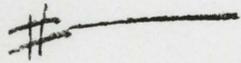
“She got the family share of legs.”

Sitting and blowing, he gandered around at the rock faces, the quilled forest below, while Lexa watched him.

“Lex? Everybody thinks I’m as strong as a Bibleful of oxes. I’m reasonably sure myself I don’t have a leg in the grave yet. This country could not be prettier. Then why is this so hard?”

She patiently pulled out the quad map to show him. "We're climbing about, oh, a thousand feet an hour in through here. See these contour lines, [?] each of those is a forty-foot rise in elevation--that's not what you mean, though, is it."

"The guy on my back is what I mean."



At the bottom of Mitch's backpack sat the box of ashes.

Pulling into the Rozier driveway the night before with her Great Falls-bought trove of trail gear for them, Lexa had managed to not quite run down Mitch as he headed for the machine shed, the beige box in his hands.

"Caught me at it," he said. "Give me a hand with this, okay?"

Together they went into the shed and Mitch handed her the box, stepped on the antiquated platform scale and weighed himself, grimacing. Then he took the box and had Lexa do the weighing while he held it. She pushed the balance along with her index finger, a little a time. At six pounds more than Mitch's weight, it balanced.

He backed off the scale. "Then it's so. A person's ashes weigh about the same as a newborn baby. Trite and true."

Lexa held her tongue about any such neat arithmetic of life.

In the flurry of assembling gear for the hiking trip, Mariah crossed paths with them as Lexa was closing the machine shed door. Her eyes fastened onto the box Mitch held.

“Weighing in our distinguished hitchhiker,” he joked lamely.

Without a word

^ Mariah stared on at the box. In India she had witnessed a public cremation. Fire on the Ganges, the funeral pyre floating. One of maybe fifty funeral pyres: she’d had to choose among that flotilla of conflagrations, fire-rafts of souls she had never known. Several summers before when the big fires swept Yellowstone Park, she had spent weeks shooting on the firefighters’ lines, had seen every part of nature burn, lone trees suddenly aflame, the persisting lick of fire on a charred buffalo, entire mountains red in firestorm. Yet it had not prepared her for what came into her viewfinder at the eternal and filthy river: that the flames of a person were like any other. Maybe that was what had made her hands shake when she took that picture of human fuel flaring into the universe and again now as she looked at Mitch and all that remained of his corporeal father. ~~For once she didn’t say~~

anything.

~~_____~~

Now Lexa flexed the straps of her pack off the front of her shoulders by thrusting her thumbs under the strap pads, as if to unloosen Mitch from his rock perch, too.

“You’re still on that? Your dad going woo-woo in his last wish? What happened to ‘flinch and bear it’?”

“Goddamnit, I can’t help having trouble with this ashes idea. It feels operatic or something.”

She did not want this trailside repose to go on too long. Periodic brief stops, a few quick deep breaths, were better than a long leadbutt sitdown. “Mitch, not to get on your case or anything, but we ought to keep moving.”

“That’s one opinion.”

“As we say in the barrel-racing profession, ‘Giddyup.’”

“Minute more.”

“Come on, town kid. What’d they tell you back there in UW football practice-- ‘Roll on, Iron Tumbleweed’?”

His head snapped up. “They did not!”

“Or, oh ho ho, I bet I know. Those coaches of yours knitted samplers of this one from pairs of their old white socks, didn’t they. The one that starts off, ‘When--’”

“Lex, don’t. Not that old crap, okay? Honest, I’ll--”

“--the going gets--”

“Lexa, I’m warning you!”

“--tough, the tough get--”

“Look, I’m on my feet. Holy Kajesus, you’d have made a hard-ass coach.”



They dry-camped that first night, high but shelved out of the wind, they hoped.

Their only company at the timberline campsite was the crests of the gigantic reef formations and the portals between. Jericho, its bowed palisade the nearest to them, appeared to arch its back in everlasting surprise as the plains butted into its bedrock.

Across a deep thickly forested gulch from Jericho, Roman Reef stood higher and a mile longer, its rimrock crest as regular as the frieze of a vestal temple but incalculably more ancient. Grizzly Reef, true to its name, seemed to threaten on into eternity with its half-turned slab face targeting north toward the flanks of the other two.

Moving stiffly as marionettes, Mitch and Mariah had gone to their packs to dig out sweatshirts, hours of dusk yet ahead here under the timbered shoulder. Lexa already was setting up things for supper. Loaf of heavy dark bread, tough nourishing stuff.

Uwajimaya noodles, a good carbo load. Thuringer sausage, protein supreme. A menu that would have set off prepare-to-waddle alarms in them all down on the flatlands but would be welcomed by digestive systems up here.

“What can I do to help, cookie?” Mariah inquired as she came back over tugging down a sweatshirt which read across its front *Mount Cook Guide Service--Glaciers are a kick in the ice.*

“Firewood for later,” Lexa recited. “Tents. Roll out the sleeping bags. Dig a potty place over there in the trees.”

“That’ll teach me to ask.” Mariah cast a look in a pertinent direction.

“I heard, I heard.” Mitch headed off into the timber. “I’ll do the woodsy stuff.”

Squatting to untie Lexa’s tent packet, Mariah grimaced. “My legs ache in every pore.”

“No shit, ridge runner.”

“Aren’t you tired at all?”

“Sure. But it’s a good tired.”

Mariah looked up at her sister standing there against the sky as she stretched, arms out and fists balled, at ease after earning this mountain.

#—————

The freshest of fresh air woke Mitch in the morning. Only inches of him were outside the sleeping bag, from his nose on up, but those were thermometer enough. He saw there was frost on the outside of the tent. He lay looking at it a minute, then

reluctantly risked an arm outside the down bag and put a finger up to the tent fabric. The frost was on the *inside* of the tent, too.

There was scrabbling at his tent flap.

Lexa came scooting in. Shucking her unlaced boots, she slid inside the sleeping bag with him. "Came to check out the rumor on you--cold feet, warm heart?"

"Good morning, Nanook. You didn't tell me this was going to be a polar experience."

"Brisk, is all." She puffed an experimental cloud of breath toward the frost motif on the tent ceiling. "Think of it as not snow." She snuggled in on him some more.

"Having any fun?"

"Through all these layers of clothes?"

"I meant the hike." Nonetheless she kissed the place under his ear in incendiary fashion. Tempting as it was to continue on each other from there, murmurs between asleep and awake were emanating from the neighborhood of Mariah. Lexa gave him a promissory *later, sailor* wink and they stayed almost nose to nose to transmit warmth. From such close range she noticed Mitch's face was starting to look seamed. As if Lyle's generational markings were already shifting to him. The twinge that this gave her reminded her to ask:

"How's every little muscle this morning?"

“Letting me know they spent the night on the ground,” Mitch admitted. “Stiff, is all--nothing really shrieking.”

“Hey, then,” she sounded pleased, “you’re in not bad shape, considering. When’s the last night you slept in a tent? Boy Scouts?”

He went still.

Coldwater Ridge. One other fine bright conscienceless morning, amid mountains with lodes of time up their canyon sleeves. Juanita Trippe another relentlessly cheerful morning type, surely out there on the ridge smiling in Mt. St. Helens’ direction when volcanic hell cut loose.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Nothing anything could be done about. “The tent and I? A big while ago,” he said huskily.

The current mountain, which had been so early to go into dusk, now made up for it by being the first to catch sunshine. The orange tent fabric began to give vivid light.

“Looks like a sweetie of a day,” Lexa reported to Mitch, propping onto one elbow to check on the dawn’s progress. Moisture pearled on the ceiling of the tent, and she swiped away the worst of it with a bandanna. By now the frost on the outside was melting into plump globules, and she and he lay there watching the beads of water blip around on the grid of

the tent pattern, like some outer space video game screen. Taking turns poking under a poised glob to make it run, they giggled and estimated that each one of these raindrop races knocked a point off their IQs.

"I better get to work on breakfast," Lexa finally called this off. "What can the chef put you into ecstasy with this morning, the soup du jour or the bread of life?"

"I like either, so I'll have both," Mitch declaimed with a stretch and a grunt, coaxing his body into the day.

Mariah was fumbling a fire into being, and before long they were breakfasting on steaming pea soup and pumpernickel and hot chocolate.

~~##~~
This day's hiking had a reward only an hour into it, the talus shoulder of the mountain and downhill ahead. Now they were in the Bob. Up here in the interior peaks and the supple valleys under them lay its million acres of designated wilderness. And up ahead, on the skyline, the Continental Divide the guarding rim of it all.

At the marker amid the rockfield on top, Mariah insisted on posing Lexa and Mitch like summit conquerors, their packs leaning nonchalantly against the tin yellow National Wilderness Area sign wired onto its west side. While she fussed with her camera setting, Lexa telling her she would eventually get the hang of it, Mitch sneaked peeks back

down at the Two Medicine National Forest land they had come through, ever since Agency Lake. Oil and gas, pocketed in those geological folds; *Just remember*, Lyle Rozier's memorial gravel handy for roads to them, *you're walking all on money*. He faced around to Mariah's camera with not his best expression.



When they set out again, the trail zigzagged down and then flattened across a broad scoop of valley, meadowed where it wasn't forested, a stretch of miles they accepted with silent gratitude after yesterday's more vertical ones.

It was only mid-afternoon when they came to the clear rush of water. Aspens pintoed the opposite bank, their leaves exquisitely trembling in the least whiff of breeze. From not far upstream poured the more industrious sound of a waterfall, twenty or thirty feet high, a toboggan of white water. The rocky sidehill around the waterfall broke up through the valley floor, like the mammoth root of a mountain surfacing, strewing the streambed and the slope down to it with stones the size of small flagstones. In the broken mosaic of it all, the water pooled and then tumbled down rapids like glass over marbles.

"Ledge Creek," Lexa announced off her map. More than evidently she was on the ledge, a low smooth sedimentary span that led like a little dock to where the shallow stream could be crossed on other flat stones. She had close company there: a rough-mounded

cairn, no taller than she was, had been built on the ledge near the water's edge. Standing there absorbing the glorious surroundings, she clapped her hat on top of the monument and ran her hands through her hair.

The other two trailed up onto the vantage point next to her and the compact tower of rocks.

"Why one here, I wonder?" Mariah kicked at the cairn's base a little, as if wanting it out of the way.

Absorbed elsewhere, Lexa simply gestured around. "Duh. Where the rocks are."

"Thank you for sharing that, Ms. Einstein," Mariah said none too mildly. "But you know what I mean. Up along the Divide or back at the Two boundary, sure, you expect these anywhere there. But not directing traffic at a creek crossing." She squeezed past the cairn, still seeming to take its presence personally.

"What, are you allergic to monuments all of a sudden?" Lexa said absently, still gazing around at the waterfall, the chorusing creek, the nimble grove of aspens. "Probably it was one of our bored shepherders."

"Duh yourself. The old Primitive Area here, remember."

"Jesus, Mariah, *I* don't know how it got--"

“I believe, as an expert on the behavior of rocks,” Mitch stepped in to head off sisterdom’s sudden propensity toward civil disturbance over anything mineral, vegetable, or animal, “that these, how do you say it in America, *dogpiled* onto each other.” He ran a hand over the uneven but effective dry-stone construction. “It’s standing up okay, but it doesn’t look like anybody put in all their time on it.”

“Well, it has some scenery,” Lexa said as if this spot on earth needed her defending. “Good-looking campsite.”

Mitch was watching her hopefully, and so was Mariah.

Lexa chewed her lip, calculating.

“It’ll make a humongous day tomorrow, but we seem to be ready for this.” She plucked her hat off the monument. “Okay, gang? Let’s go unload.”

As soon as they were on the other side of the creek, they saw they were not the first to think of it as a camping spot. A canvas tepee gray with age poked up not far downstream, on a nice high dry place handy to the water. No one around, though, when they approached it, and the campfire ashes were not recent. Inspecting, they whistled appreciatively at the amenities: dragged-up logs to sit on, a fire circle of blackened ~~creek~~ rocks, even a rusted but serviceable cooking grill that gladdened Lexa’s heart. Mitch zeroed in on the tepee, walking around it in admiration.

“A tent tall enough to stand up in? Wouldn’t that be too bad. *Woop!*” He nearly fell over a bundle in the grass at the rear of the tepee.

The others joined him and stared down at a rolled-up sleeping bag that had a foam mat wrapped around it for protection. The protection had not much worked; the foam had been vigorously gnawed through, shreds of bag fabric and tufts of down oozing out through the mauled mat.

Lexa shot a look toward the tepee, Mitch and Mariah an instant after her. Muddy pawprints at shoulder height showed where the animal, evidently up on its hind feet like somebody nearsighted feeling along a wall, had patted along the canvas of the tepee until deciding to rip its way in.

The trio stared at the claw-cut slash, big enough for a grizzly to walk through.

“We can assume the griz isn’t in there any more,” Lexa deduced.

Their combined six eyes frisked the low brush along the creek.

“So then where is he. It.” Trying not to sound nervous, Mitch wanted to know with some urgency: “Don’t we want to clear out of here?”

“Minutes ago?” chimed Mariah, her head swiveling back and forth steadily as a radar dish.

“Probably not,” Lexa figured out loud. “The bear has been and gone. If we’re careful to make noise and build a fire, generally announce ourselves, it isn’t likely to bother back here again real soon. Zweborg used to say each grizzly bear has a hunting territory bigger than Rhode Island.”

“Lexa, Rhode Island is the most microscopic state.”

“Mitch, if a bear wants to come visiting, it *could* come visiting if we were camped out on the trail somewhere.”

“I’m not for that either,” he conceded.

“Okay, then,” Mariah voted, shucking off her backpack. “If we’re going to be eaten, let’s be eaten in comfort.”

They banged cooking pots together and whooped and hollered for some minutes, a racket that they felt would clear any self-respecting grizzly out of the valley. Then turned to the night’s hostelry, unsnugging the tepee flap and stooping in like cave explorers. Strewn in there were other sets of mat-encased bedrolls, tossed around by the bear after some sample bites.

“Fishing camp.” Mariah pointed to the rod tips sticking out of the ends of a few of the foam rolls.

“Hunter-gatherer time!” Lexa exulted.

“His clan’s tools of the trade, right here,” Mariah happily seconded.

They could form alliances quicker than he could turn around, Mitch too late realized. “Sexism,” he protested. “Fishermanism. How about if I spread doilies around in here while you two go kill fish?”

The McCaskill sisters only snickered. “What’s the use of having an alpha male along,” Mariah was asking Lexa rhetorically, “if he won’t get out there and alph?”

Lexa knew another formula. “Fried trout for supper,” she cooed in Mitch’s direction. “Golden brown. Just crisp enough you can eat them with your fingers, like corn on the cob. If only some big strong mansie would go catch them.”

“You are the Bobbsey Twins from Hell,” Mitch observed.

A bit of soothing came from Mariah, who said she might as well come help slay trout after the tepee was kicked into shape, while Lexa said she wanted the leisure of setting up a camp kitchen in style for a change.

Armed with rod and pocket-size box of lures that had been tucked into the middle of a mat bundle and a few angleworms he’d scouted from under rocks, Mitch headed up the creek. Past the crossing and the cairn was water which he thought either should have fish in it or be impounded for false pretenses. It was a classic pool, dappled with shadow and blue, while an apprentice waterfall about two feet high spilled in over a terracelike ledge.

Snags abounded in the brush roots and fallen trees along the faster water that riffled out of the lower end of the pool, but he thought he could do something with the shade-quiet eddy along the edge of all that. Knowing there was going to be a lot of rust in his casting, he decided to stick with tin fishing--lures--instead of trying to deposit worms or grasshoppers delicately across thirty feet of pool into skeptical fish.

Just when he had been at this long enough to get into the fishing mood, halfway between boredom and fascination, he heard willow branches thrashing.

The crashing in the brush had familiar red hair. "How's fishin'?" Mariah called across the pool in more than passable Bacall huskiness.

"The fishing's great. The catching isn't worth a crap."

Rod already at the ready, she glanced up and down the stream at the lay of the water. "Mind if I sneak in here and try the riffle?"

"Just don't catch any of the ones I'm slowly hypnotizing."

Mariah made a respectable but not great cast. "It's been about forever," she self-critiqued her technique. "Since my ex. Last person you'd expect to find up to his brisket in the Clark Fork, whipping the water with this stuff. But there he'd be, so I did some with him. Never got as good at it as he was," she mused into another toss of her line, "so at least our marriage wasn't done in by that."

“Anything worth doing is worth doing so-so,” Mitch attested. He aimed, flicked the first cast yet that felt right, bounced the lure off a half-submerged tree trunk, and it plopped squarely into the eddy he wanted.

“No fair,” she protested. “You didn’t warn me you’ve got coordination.”

“It’s all in the--~~Yow!~~” The hit of the fish dipped the end of his fishing pole.

“Don’t horse him!” she shouted as he instinctively yanked the pole back. “You’ll lose him, ~~play him in slow!~~”

“Right right right. Okay, I’m playing him, *no, not under the log, you bastard,* there, right this way --”

Mariah was so busy laughing she let her line drift into a snag. “Oh, horseshit.”

“What’s this I hear, nasty talk in the vicinity of my meal?” He had the trout, about a twelve-inch rainbow, on the bank.

Mariah eyed toward her branch-snarled line, which was on Mitch’s side of the creek, and then at Mitch.

He smiled vengefully. “Don’t even think it, lady.”

She puckered and blew a raspberry at him, then surged into the water. To reach the riffle she had to wade along the side of the pool, in almost up to her waist, and then clamber among the submerged rocks until she could bend down and get hold of the snag to

snap it off. Mitch watched every moment of it, not least because of how interestingly her wet Levi's were plastered on her. Finally holding up the soggy black branch with her hook and line still tangled in it, she turned and gave Mitch a baleful little grin. Then outfished him six to three.

~~##~~

They came rolling back into camp like old whaling chums, showing off their catch on a willow stringer apiece, the trout lovely as jewel-dusted jade.

Lexa got busy on supper. The campfire smoke behaved beautifully, twining straight up like a mystic rope trick. In daylight's last act at this spot, aspen shadows danced on the creek water. The waterfall drew silver from the air. She kept marveling around over her shoulder as she pottered the meal together.

She was frying the trout when she heard the sound of a keyboard in use.

Mitch was hunched on a jackpine log, tapping away at the laptop across his knees.

"You packed that?" Lexa stormed. Skreek of the frying pan's bottom as she yanked it across the campfire grill to inspect the golden-brown fish. "No wonder I got stuck with carrying all the cooking gear and most of the food, too."

"I had to. Any of my Bob Marshall stuff is on disk." Looking caught, he chucked back into his pack the extra batteries he'd brought, away from her counting eye. "The guy was a hiking machine," he alibied lightly. "I thought I'd pick up some tips."

Silence met that.

"Habit, Lex, okay?" he came clean. "Even if I don't have anyplace to write for any more."

Supper in them and the fire pleasant, they sat watching a placid sunset, the last light raying like golden spokes through the treetops on the rim of the valley. The minute the sun went down, Mitch dug out his laptop again with a wary glance at Lexa.

"Play 'April in Paris,'" Mariah requested dreamily.

He vamped a run along a piano keyboard, and even Lexa broke up.

"All right, techie gear freak," she said in resignation. "What's with our man Bob?"

"He was a strange one," Mitch shook his head. "Maybe saints in any trade are.

Marshall was a kind of bean-counting poet." He hit a few keys and peered close to read off the small screen: "*First snow on the Lolo Trail, September 6, 1928. The path was too muddy to show white so soon, but the grass along the sides and the surrounding trees were already blanketed. Under this cover flowers, berries, mosses, highly pigmented rocks,*

everything that made the forest warm and colorful, had vanished. In a few hours the season had jumped from late summer completely over autumn, and had landed frigidly in January.' "

Mitch bopped the side of his head with the flat of his hand in admiration.

"You get that from him one minute, next he's geeking around counting every sonofabitching thing. Literally. *'Conversation between lumberjacks today: God 38, Damn 33, Jesus ¹6, Christ ¹3...*' on down through *Bastard, Hell, Ass, Fart...* you get the picture," he joined the others' laughter at the hallelujah chorus of swearing.

"How was he on *'Sightings of bears'*?" Mariah went facetiously wide-eyed.

"Like, how many guh-guh-guh--"

"Don't start with that." Mitch glanced into the coming dark.

"Nobody in the history of Rhode Island," Lexa pitched in with a lecturing tone.

"has ever ended up as a hide on the floor of a grizzly's den."

"Miles on the trail," Mitch adamantly steered his topic past theirs. "Marshall kept track of every one of those babies. I'm up to 1938 in his notebook and here's the kind of thing, over in the Flathead: *'8 day totals: miles, 288...feet climbed, 54,000...number of peaks ascended, 20.'*"

As she heard this, the back of Lexa's neck prickled. She, too, had the impulse to always tally the distance she had covered, calculate the outdoors into herself incessantly. The same mainspring that drove her to measure herself against the clock in barrel-racing, perhaps. Whatever installed it, ever since the first time she set foot into these mountains and took off up a grassy mountainside with Mariah while their father dealt with a sheepherder, she would run through her mind a sweet-sad estimate of the amount of time ahead, how many more years of hiking she had left if she lived to be such-and-such. Who knew, Lyle maybe had some such soul calculus, when he was up here at eighteen.

"Jesus," Mariah let out in a way Bob Marshall would have given her extra points for, "what'd he do, *run*?"

"Pushed himself like crazy," Mitch confirmed. "That probably was what killed him. Remember, all he was doing in the Forest Service in the meanwhile was installing the whole wilderness system, against every old bull of the woods who figured trees are there to be chopped down. So there he was, dead at thirty-eight. Makes those of us who are too old for drugs and too young for Alzheimer's wonder what the hell we ever spent any time at." Broodily he heaved a piece of wood onto the campfire, sparks taking to the air.

"Spooky last chapter for you," he told the women watching him in the firelight. "The obits say Marshall went back to Washington from one of his high lonesomes out here and

right away died on the train to New York. Conductor found him in his sleeper when the train pulled in to Penn Station.”

“Lead us not into Penn Station,” Mariah said reflectively in preacher tone. Lexa seemed to be appraising every scuff on her veteran hiking boots.

They talked on for a long while, held by the fire and a demon hiker who believed mountains made the difference in the world.



The wind came up in the night, the canvas walls of the tepee flapping as if wanting to sail away. When the canvas commotion woke Mitch he rolled over, listened to Lexa breathing in her sleep as regular as a swimmer and Mariah's in the minor key of z, then went out and built up the campfire. For once he was up first, the next morning, starting the oatmeal and coffee by the time the women ducked out under the tepee flap.

Lexa kept them on the move all this day. One step, another, rhythm across the hours. Up Ledge Creek the country roughened into abrupt little gulleys with muddy bottoms. Then at the head of the creek a boggy area lay in wait with clouds of mosquitoes. Amid three sets of voluble swatting, they doused repellent on their necks and ^{the} backs of their hands and cuffs and collars and slogged through. When they came out into Big Elk Meadow, over them stood the crag with an outcropping that resembled a nose of delicacy,

its placement of eyes a lucky accident of symmetry by winsome sockets of rockslide.

Phantom Woman lived up to its name in its bearing, comely at first glance but then oddly withdrawing; at the mountain's hem, the timber began green-black and luxurious, then gradually silvered away upward on its slopes where forest fires of old had left a coarse shawl of snags. Wordlessly Lexa pointed out a certain pocket of rock, and Mariah whipped out mini-binoculars but could discern no goats.

By noon the tightly bunched trio of hikers was edging toward the mountain through Flathead Gorge, with Yosemite-like rock thrusts browning in above them on either side. The trail here was no more than a ribbon across a talus face, with a clear creek plunging along sometimes two hundred feet below them. At what passed for a wide spot in the dizzying trail Lexa decided it was the time for the reward of lunch, and had it backfire when they heard the sound of rocks avalanching somewhere not far behind them. They ate on the go until they were out of the gorge and at the base of the trail up Phantom Woman.

They climbed the mountainslope in perfect sunshine and a ripping wind. It caught at their packs absurdly hard, the three of them leaning into the cloudless gale swearing and laughing. Around them the wildflowers, lupine and Indian paintbrush and daisies, tugged against the tethers of their stems. Dandy day for a picnic up here, if you didn't mind a hurricane as a guest. Over the force of the wind Lexa yelled that she was going to have to

shed her hat. Mariah complained that her eyes kept watering up so that she couldn't see to sight in her camera. Mitch said little, just trying to cope against this air-avalanche down from the mountain. He was taking the rest-steps Lexa had tutored him in; step-pause a moment-another step.

They plodded, swayed. Dusk came to their side of the mountain. Lexa knew they were cutting this pretty fine. She had them gobble granola bars and raisins and keep trudging.

They made it to the top as the setting sun was washing the fire tower in light, peaks and valleys stroked into heavier outline. Straddling the summit of the mountain and windowed all around, the tower faced four directions at once. Its stilty legs were a bit spraddled, built to angle all possible support to the sky-riding cabin at their precarious top. The sunset ran through its gradations, yellow to gold to pewter, as Lexa, Mitch, Mariah made for the tower with the last exertion they had left. Drifting over from the west were small puffy clouds all the same size, as if being turned out by an ice machine. Ridiculously on cue, as the trio reached the base of the tower the last of the light set the clouds glowing red, like coals of the sun. The done-in hikers trooped up the steep three flights of stairs, their bootsteps tattoos of sound in the mountain silence. Did hurried housekeeping to the lookout cabin, sweeping mouse droppings into the stairwell with a broom worn down to its

nub. Feasted on the hot meal Lexa conjured in record time. Then slept, slept, slept as night came to the Bob.



Mariah's sleeping bag was empty when Lexa sat up in the first of light the next morning. Rolling her shoulders a little to unstiffen from the night on the floor and vaguely combing her hair with her hands, she blinked around at the aged cabin, elemental in its furnishings and decidedly not built for three. Their packs and cooking gear and Mariah's movable photographic emporium were strewn as if everything had been dumped out in the dark. Which, she reflected, had pretty much been the case. She peeked past the rickety old table in the middle of it all to see how Mitch was faring in his share of the cluttered space. His sleeping bag, too, was vacant.

Her every motion stopped. Silence, heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat... Now she heard a cough from out on the railed platform that cupped around the cabin on all sides.

"Mitch?"

"Taking a whizz," he warned her against coming out. "Care-ful-ly. Got your choice up here, claustrophobia or acrophobia." After a minute she heard him zip up.

"Okay, the scenery is undiluted again. Come see."

She stuck her feet in her boots but didn't lace them, pulled on a sweatshirt and
 clopped to the open door to the deck.

She came out yawning, and then simply stood catching her breath at the view. The
 lookout tower was aptly placed, you could see out over a dozen watersheds and
 headwaters, out to the dark pelt of pine on a hundred mountains, out into supple valleys,
 out all the way to the half-mile-high walls of stone that fronted the mountain range. Up
 here the continent was tipsy with mountains. Three ranks now stood between them and the
 trailhead at Agency Lake, and throngs of peaks to the west. And of all these, the beadline
 of gravity rested here on this stony brow. Down Phantom Woman's back, ~~this meant~~, the
 snows and rains of the seasons ran off into the westgoing rivers that culminated in the
 Columbia and the great gate to the Pacific at Astoria. Those trickling off its front streamed
 away to the Missouri River and thence the Mississippi River and at last into the vast delta
 catchment at the Gulf of Mexico. Inclines of the continent under her in both directions,
 Lexa moved to the railing beside Mitch and went up on tiptoes, seeing all the way back to
 when she was ~~twelve~~ *a girl with her first horse*.

After a while she said, "No wonder this place stuck in your dad's mind."

"It should have." Mitch bounced a fist on the railing as if testing the tower.

She glanced sideways at him. The fatigue lines in his face made her remind, "Day off."

"Going to use it, too. Catch some more sleep. Then maybe have a nap. And after that, relax with my eyes closed."

He seemed to be serious. *Can anybody be that tired and still be breathing?*

But then he gave her a difficult little smile and admitted: "Need to collect my thoughts. Today isn't anywhere on what I thought was the graph paper of my life." He arched his head partway around toward the cabin and his pack with the box of ashes in it. "Or what I thought was the guest of honor's."

"You want mental health time, you've got it," Lexa bestowed. "Let's get some breakfast in us, and I'll go see what Mariah is burning film on."

~~_____~~ Mariah did not know--who ever does?--how she had arrived at past-forty and still had to figure out her job every cottonpicking new day. Wouldn't you think the act of taking a picture was essentially the same each time: camera, lens, film speed ought to add up to abracadabra, no? This picture, this morning, no.

She rambled around the summit of the mountain, trying from here and there in the early morning light she adored (not for nothing were television commercials for cars shot at

dawn in front of the Tetons or the Rockies, after all) and each time she sensed with the click of the shutter that the shot was a throwaway. *Too bad you don't believe in the Zen Zone*, she tweaked herself, *and just leave the lens cap on all the time*. In Grenoble she'd had a battle royal with one of the old lionesses of photography, a portly presence who had been in the Magnum agency with Capa and Cartier-Bresson. "I no longer any more need to take the photograph," the grande dame insisted. "I see it, and it stays forever in my mind." Mariah went at her from every which way, arguing that whatever was in her mind it was not a photo. (She had got into a similarly intense debate, but full of bowing and ducking, with her host in Kyoto over haiku. Why always a seventeen-syllable poem what if an eighteenth syllable would make it better? What if sixteen sounded just right? Her host's reminder that sonnets too had a set form did nothing to change her mind. Mariah was not your sonnet type.) She hoped she never reached the point of scorning the photo for the shadow in the brain.

"How's it going?" Lexa called as she cut across the mountain's topknot of meadow to her.

Mariah made a face. "As we high-toned photographers say, I seem to be trying to polish a turd here. Hoped I'd get a book shot out of this"--she nodded toward the fire tower--"to pair with the Bell Rock."

“Nothing wrong with the idea.” Lexa deeply meant it. Their grandfather’s mountain-topping tower for his lookouts, one of the string he caused to be built across his English Creek Ranger District after being handed the wounded district; the inferno of 1929 had burned on for nearly a month up here, a generation of trees charring away, Phantom Woman madly determined to wear black. *His* great-grandfather’s lighthouse on an impossible smidgin of rock off the coast of Scotland; stonemasons, Alexander McCaskill among them for three years, plying their tools on granite at low tide and fleeing in boats at high. Marks against the sky, Mariah and Lexa both knew, in their family history.

“But it doesn’t hold up in the viewfinder,” Mariah lamented. “Old lookout tower here just won’t compare to a granite lighthouse. I’ve shot it from every fancy angle I can think of, and it sits there like a stack of toothpicks and says--” Mariah gave a chorus director’s downbeat.

“*Duh!*” the sisters chimed together.

“Anyway, it’ll do to slap on a Sunday page,” Mariah concluded. “So that’s my day so far. What’ve you been up to, a little ten-mile hike?”

“Mariah? You know your trouble?” Lexa told her with narrowed eyes, startling the daylights out of her. “You don’t put your munchies where your mouth is.” Lexa whipped a bag of trail mix out from behind her back.

“Breakfast? I’ve heard of that. My sister the foodie, what will I do without you?”

Mariah wolfed into the trail mix, Lexa taking an occasional handful herself as they kept track of the morning’s tones of light on the mountains around. Through most of a mouthful Mariah asked: “You and Mitch heading back to the Coast as soon as we get down out of here?”

“I’m going to have to, or turn the business into Ex-Do-Re-Mi Catering.”

“Mmm, know what you mean. I need to haul butt into the Falls and that museum residency, or change my name to Absentia.” With a ghost of a grin Mariah turned to face Lexa: “Three more days of each other’s unforgettable company, then, kitten. If our guide knows how to get us back.”

“Nothing to it.” Lexa grinned back. “All you have to do is roll downhill for thirty miles.”



They gathered on the observation deck just before dusk. Mariah positioned Mitch at the railing in the best light, scenery galore behind him for the ashes to cascade out into. “It’s going to be so good,” she crooned of the picture-to-be. Then frowned around the deck. “Wish I could get higher.”

"You came into the world wishing that," Lexa told her. She gestured at the mountains everywhere below Phantom Woman. "There *isn't* higher."

"Actually," Mariah mused, "there is. Up by the lightning rod."

The other two could see, as she did, that the shingles didn't amount to much any more, but the roofboards looked sound. She strode over and tested the board rungs up the side of the cabin to the roof. "They'll hold me. I think." And began to climb.

Grimacing, Lexa watched her progress. "Mariah, you fall off there and we'll have to scoop you up with spoons."

"Yes, little mother." She did, though, lodge herself firmly above the stanchion base of the lightning rod.

It was time, Mitch knew. Lexa waiting with her patented get-on-with-it expression, Mariah up there like a sniper in heaven. Nerved up as he was, he approached the railing of the platform as if it lipped out over the Grand Canyon.

"Mitch?" Lexa's tone was light, but meaningful. "Figure out where downwind is, then don't be there, okay?"

Feeling silly, he licked a finger and held it up for a minute, the drying telling him the direction of the barely perceptible breeze, and moved so that his body was between the whisper of air and the box clutched to his middle. Then he balanced the ash receptacle on

the graywood of the railing, his gaze fixed on the rock brow of Phantom Woman below.

We take you now to the tomb of the known soldier. My father, the sergeant of the

Continental Divide. For a crazy moment all he could think of was his father's habit of

sniffing deeply, as if trying to snare air in from this most distant horizon of the

nowhereville where he led his life. *If he had such a taste of this country the summer he*

was up here, then why...

One more time Mitch reminded himself this was a ~~How~~ occasion, not a ~~Why~~. He made sure that he had the ashes in a firm enough grip to be shaken, sprinkled out in prescribed fashion except, he was determined, not in the direction that would carry them toward the eye of the mountain. Gathering breath, he tried to find the words to commend his father to this wilderness, the peace of pine valleys and windsinging mountains.

What came out was:

"This is too weird."

He took the box off the railing, holding it cradled as if not to let it squirm away.

"My father never cared a whoop about any of this," he spoke as if to the surroundings, "one way or the other. No, I take that back - he wanted it carved up into money. Just never quite managed to figure out how."

Lexa gave him a careful looking^d-at. This was not the sendoff⁼ Lyle had in mind, pretty surely.

Mitch met her eyes. "I'm not going to do it. His ashes don't belong up here."

"Mitch, very very funny," Mariah called down from where she was sprawled on ^{with camera coaxed and ready} the roof. "You gave my chain a real yank there for a moment. The rest of the kidding later, though, okay? My light is starting to go."

"For real, Mariah. No performance." Mitch stepped away from the railing, then thought to say in the direction of the cabin roof: "Sorry about your picture."

"Oh, come on, you've got to." Peering at him over her camera, Mariah appeared perfectly diplomatic except for those two perturbed indents between her eyes. "You can't haul--carry someone's ashes all the way up here and then not go through with it."

"You're seeing it."

"God damn," Mariah emitted. She came down the ladder in nothing flat and over to Mitch at least that swiftly.

"We hiked three days to do this! The light is right, the setup couldn't be better, you've got the ashes right there in your hands the way your father *asked* you to, all you have to do is open the box and--" Mariah gestured as if madly salting soup ^{SHAKE!}

Mitch shook only his head, at her.

She stood planted there looking at him with whatever is beyond disbelief. "Lexa, you could pitch in," she said through her teeth.

Lexa made a despairing noise in her throat, then managed:

"Mitch, you did promise him--"

"It saved a fight while he was dying, what choice did I have?" Mitch retorted. "But I can't believe he lived up to his end of this, either. Here's a man who told forty thousand stories in his life, everything that ever happened to him, and he never once mentioned this," he nodded emphatically downward. "So where did it come from all of a sudden, his big notion that this fire tower owes its existence to him? That he ever did anything for country like this?" The expression on Lexa went even more pinched. Mariah still looked purely furious. He felt bad that Mariah was taking it this way; here went being bosom fishing buddies and all that. But this was his to contend with, his and the mischief merchant boxed up in his hands. "The whole thing doesn't sit right," Mitch stubbornly maintained to the two women. He swept a hand out toward the earthly kingdom of Marshall, the wilderness, then whapped it against the side of the box. "My father didn't earn his way up here in the least, he worked against the Bob every chance he could."

The instant he stopped, Mariah launched again:

“Your father didn’t know me from a can of paint when I showed up and asked him to do one of the hardest things you can ask of a person--let me stick my camera in his dying face. Whatever else you think about him, that took guts for him to say ‘Sure, shoot away.’ Why is it so tough for you to go through with what he wanted as his last shot?”

“His last *wish*,” Lexa put in, her tone equally exasperated.

“His last fast one,” Mitch insisted, “that he was trying to pull with this. I don’t know why, I don’t know straight-up ~~any more~~ about half the cockeyed deals he cooked up. But this is another Lyle Special--I can feel it. Something for nothing, if he can just punch our buttons right.”

Mariah bit her lip, her eyes snapping around at the dissipating light and her foot tapping the platform floor with the sound of an impatient woodpecker. “I’ll tell you what let’s do: how about we take a vote?”

“We are not going to goddamn *vote!*” Mitch moved farther away from the railing. “He put this on me. And I’m not going to let him get away with it--going out of the world in some phony fancy way.”

“Never mind his sake, then,” Lexa’s turn came. “I think,” she said in a voice struggling to stay even, “you ought to throw those ashes and get him out of your craw.”

“No can do. I--”

“Which? *Which?*” Lexa blazed. “Toss those into the wind, or get over your father? Mitch, which can’t you do?”

“Lexa, will you just let me handle my own family matter?”

She gestured angrily to what he had in his hands. “You don’t seem to want to handle it.”

“*Want* to, no. But I’m trying.” He gave her a beseeching look, to no apparent avail. “He’s the one who dumped all this on us.” Mitch shook the box as if to demonstrate his father’s shifty nature. “Turn what little we’ve got into a gravel pit, sell every yuppie a brand for his llama, and oh by the way, ‘Sprinkle my ashes on the Continental Divide, the country of my heart although I never gave any least indication of that in my previous 75 years.’ Lexa, it’s one whole hell of a lot to get over. It’s too much.”

He looked from her to Mariah and back again. “He’s going back down with us.”



Supper was snappy in more ways than one.

Lexa, giving off about as much heat as the camp stove she fired up, whipped together a pot of Uwajimaya noodles with carrots sliced in and flung in flecks of basil for flavor. (Mitch tentatively: “Can I help?” Lexa: “No. Yes--stay out of the way.”) Mariah had stormed down the tower stairs at breakneck pace and stood out on the rock brow

fuming at the graying light until the food was ready, when she charged back up the stairs.

The three of them ate in silence except for the angry clatter of utensils. Then found themselves in another furious go-around.

“You can’t get back at him--”

“I am not getting *back* at him.”

“--after he’s dead. What good does that do?” Lexa showed no intention of waiting for an answer to her hotly-put question. “Why can’t you blow off the past stuff?”

“For the same goddamn reason you still won’t gas up at an Exxon station. Do things back somewhere *count*, or don’t they? It turns out this does, with me.”

“But you’re making it count, as you call it,” Mariah trying on a voice of reason none too successfully, “on somebody who can’t even know you are. Your dad isn’t around to have the errors of his ways corrected, is he.”

“Fine, then he won’t be bothered about not being up here, will he.”

Through it all, Lyle reposed again in the bottom compartment of Mitch’s backpack.

As soon as dark arrived they turned in, Mitch and Mariah all but wordlessly acquiescing to Lexa’s suggestion that they get an early start in the morning, down out of here. Marching orders on the trail were hers, she reflected as she angrily snuggled into her sleeping bag. It was only everything else about life that she couldn’t herd in any given

direction. *How do I keep getting hooked up with the wars of the Roziers?* The cabin was a contest area of tossing and turning. She could hear Mitch ^{lie} ~~lay~~ on one side and a restless minute later revolve to his other. She could practically feel the shockwaves when periodically Mariah reared up to punch her rolled-up sweatshirt into shape as a pillow then slam her head back down on it.

In the crow's ^g nest of the continent, Phantom Woman the topmost mast of mountain between Halifax and Astoria, the three rolled through the night.

By midnight or so, Mitch finally was in half-^g sleep, the notebook of his mind open but woozy material creeping in, *right in the old girl's eye* slurring around in there with *not without your telling me why...* He heard the dry rustle of a sleeping bag, then a pause. Lexa or Mariah, needing to go down the stairs to do the necessary and obviously reluctant about the three-flight trip in the dark. A miniscule flashlight clicked on resignedly. He started to settle back into drowse, not for the first time in his life taking satisfaction in the male anatomical arrangement. Then heard the scrabbling at the packs. Mice were to be expected, but why didn't Lexa or Mariah as the case may be step over there and scare off the persistent little--

With an explosive grunt, Mitch reared up, the sleeping bag cocooned on him. He fought at the zipper, floundering at the same time toward his backpack and the pencil beam of light there.

“Quit!” he shouted. “No you don’t! Put that back--”

Finally managing to shed the sleeping bag, Mitch closed in on the figure at the stack of packs. He couldn’t make out her face in the dark, but how many photographers were there on this mountain incensed because the devious last wish of Lyle Rozier had not been honored? She was holding the box of ashes with both hands and the tiny flashlight clamped against the box. Faced off against him in the darkened tower, she feinted with the box to one side and then the other, Mitch recalling with dismay that Mariah had been a standout ballhandler in high school basketball.

“Just put it down, okay?”

The answer was a palmed move, the box moving down behind her in the dimness while the flashlight hand flicked back and forth in the other direction.

Trying to read her in the dark, Mitch shuffled his feet in a stutter-step fake, but stayed poised just where he was.

The box came back together with the flashlight in a protective clutch and the hands hesitated for an instant. He leaped in and grabbed.

"Keep the damned stuff, then." Lexa's voice was resigned.

"I intend to," Mitch said, taking a righteous step backward from her while cradling the box tightly.

"What *is* going on?" the groggy sounds of Mariah ~~coming~~ from the direction of her sleeping bag mingled into his surprised plaint as he confronted the downcast pencil light of Lexa. "You were going to spread these off of here, weren't you. Let me wake up in the morning and that father of mine would be blowing around out there. Is that it, Lex?"

Her silence was all too much answer.

"Well, no way," his tone still high and hurt. "These," he spelled out into the dark to her, "are going back down with us," taking another step for emphasis. Backward into the stairwell.

He fell like a full keg, one thump after another after another, noises alone loud enough to bring out bruises, tumbling and tumbling down the steep chute of stairs and railing until he hit the top landing, sprawling there on his back like a flattened prizefighter. His breath knocked out of him, he lay in an aching heap waiting for the stun to go away and air to return. The box of ashes was still in his gripping arms like a recovered fumble, mashed but not leaking. Every whomp against a stairstep had left a place on him that hurt.

He managed to come to a bit more. Toward the base of his body, he realized, was something that did not feel right.

"Mitch!?"

Lexa's voice sounded almost in awe, in the dark at the top of the stairs. "You okay? Say something."

"My leg. Broken."

Lexa swore impressively and came clattering down the stairs to him.

"I know what I was going to do, and didn't," Mariah's voice and footsteps following her down. "Take that first-aid course."

"M-Mitch, I'm sorry. Am I ever sorry." With care Lexa lifted his head and shoved her sweatshirt under as a pillow. "Don't move, don't move," she keened, although he showed no signs of doing so. Her mind raced to what it ~~it~~ was going to take to get him off this mountain. "You couldn't have brought a cell phone instead of that laptop, could you." She shined the pencil-light in his eyes, checking his pupils for shock.

"Do you mind," he gritted at her, "if I don't be blind," clamping both eyes shut, "as well as half ~~dead~~?"

She turned her head toward Mariah tensely kneeling beside her on the landing.

"It's too chilly here. We've got to get him moved."

Mariah thought so too, but glanced dubiously at the long sharp flight of stairs to the tower cabin. "Up or down, do we?"

That brought Mitch's eyes open again. "If it's between griz country," he panted out, "and up with you two, I'll take you two. Although it's not a real clear choice."

The women were stymied for anything to splint his leg with until Mariah thought of the shingles she had encountered on her photographic excursion to the roof. Together they raced up and out onto the platform. In the open dark, the stars up there with them, it seemed miles down to the ground.

"Careful."

"I *am* being--oof!"

"I've got you. Take your time. Just don't--"

"I'm not going to--"

"--fall."

Mariah crept up the ladder until she could stretch from the waist and feel around on the roof, Lexa two rungs below her holding her legs in tightest clasp against the ladder boards. Pawing around up there for loosened shingles, Mariah broke several to the accompaniment of an equal number of swearwords, until she at last managed to wrest enough off.

Mitch's leg wrapped in the shingle splints from thigh to heel, they now had to maneuver him up the stairs. It was like slaughterhouse work, his agonized grunts hurting their ears as they tried to help him lift himself. Finally onto his good leg, he teetered against the railing of the landing, gasping that he was as ready for the next as he was ever going to be.

Lexa staggering under one of his shoulders and Mariah wobbling under the other, they supported him up each stair in a perilous series of lurches. Mitch, close to passing out on every tread of the way, remembered hoping that whoever installed the steps did a solid job of it, with the weight of all three of them on each one.



Like tangled contestants in a three-legged race they made it to the side of the cabin nearest the barrel stove; Mariah fretfully propped up Mitch, whose every breath now was a ragged shudder, until Lexa could drag his sleeping bag and foam pad over and they could work him down, splinted leg causing him harsh toothsucks of pain no matter how careful they tried to be, into resting position on the floor.

Lexa was still tucking and zipping him into the bag when he blurted: "The ashes. I don't want you to--"

"All right, all *right*, we won't touch them, right, Mariah?"

“Speaking for myself,” Mariah ground out, “I never have, never wanted to, don’t intend to, and won’t.”

She flung into starting a fire in the stove but Lexa didn’t wait, lighting the butane campstove and hurrying water on to heat. Seeing what she was at, Mariah went to her pack, felt around in all the gear she had in there and handed what she found to Lexa, who turned it over in the light of the candle lantern to read its label. “Can’t hurt.” In a minute she was pouring hot water and stirring and then kneeling to Mitch, Mariah holding his head up enough that he could drink from the cup she held steady for him in both hands.

“What--what’s this?”

“Black cherry Jell-O, hot. With airline brandy in it, courtesy of Mariah.”

He took a dubious swallow. The mixture was luscious. He needed no coaxing for the repeated swigs Lexa urged on him while the drink was still hot.

Gradually his breathing settled down. He felt himself going into a kind of daze, haze, combination of shock and the dark glow of the drink spreading through him. As he slipped under, the women backed off quietly.

Now that she had time, Lexa was crying. She grabbed her backpack, brought it to the table and dumped everything out.

Mariah saw she was sorting to travel light. She caught Lexa's wrist. "Why not you stay with him and I go?"

"Because I'm faster on the trail," Lexa raged in a rushing whisper. "Because the last thing Mitch needs right now is looking at my face for the next two days. Because I was the bucket head who thought I was doing everybody a favor with the ashes." *Because...*

"Those'll do," Mariah *murmured* ~~muttered~~, swallowing. She didn't let go of Lexa's wrist yet. "Two days. Coming in it took us--"

"Alone is always faster." Lexa wiped her eyes with her free hand. "It better be two days, a leg like that--"

They both checked Mitch, lying with an arm over his eyes. They hoped he was conked out and not hearing their diagnosis.

"It won't be any cinch here with him, either," Lexa pointed out softly.

Mariah let her go back to readying her pack. Lexa chucked back in one change of heavy socks, her wind/shell and rain pants, a share of trail mix, her water bottle, container of matches and fire starter, the smallest cooking pot and a Sierra cup, package of noodles, and after hesitation, the last of the sausage. "Hate to, but I'll need it." Without a word Mariah dealt her a swatch of moleskin for blistered feet, drawing a rueful glance from Lexa

as she stood there ticking off items in her head. "Let me have your sweatshirt, okay? Mine is Mitch's pillow."

Mariah crossed over to her sleeping bag and tossed the sweatshirt to her. She strenuously kept from saying anything until she saw Lexa stand the pack ready by the stairwell with neither sleeping bag nor tent strapped on.

"Lexa, think about this," Mariah whispered furiously. "Hypothermia when you have to sleep out won't help this situation!"

Lexa turned around expressionless. "That fishing camp," she reminded in a murmur. "I don't dare aim for any farther than that anyway tonight--do myself in too much." Now tried for a reassuring look to give Mariah. "Maybe I'll be lucky, meet somebody on the trail even before then."

They both knew this was the start of their fifth day with no other people than themselves.

The first hard thing was to wait for light beyond question. Stumbling ^{in dimness} on the rocks getting ^{rocky} off the summit of Phantom Woman, Lexa over and over told herself, was very much to be avoided.

At dawn plus a little, Mariah went down the lookout tower stairs with her. Mitch was asleep or passed out, they hoped one was as good as the other. Mariah's eyes glistened as she kissed Lexa. "Don't make me sisterless," she instructed with a jumpy attempt at a grin. Lexa tucked in the bottom of the *Glaciers are a kick in the ice* sweatshirt under the belt strap of her pack and wordlessly went.

Watching until the top of Lexa's pack disappeared beneath the brow of the mountain, Mariah checked west for the change of weather she could feel coming. She hoped Lexa hadn't seen the telltale thin streaks over the farthest mountains, mare's tails before more serious clouds.

#

Mitch, damn, why--

He jumbled in with every thought she tried to put to the day she had ahead of her, the mountain's severe shoulder, the gorge, the corrugated valley before the Ledge Creek crossing. The weather. If the clouds closed in up here, it could take a week to get him out. That invited complications on a broken limb, she knew that much medicine. Gangrene, her boots pounded out the syllables. Blood clot--break loose--hit the heart. Complications and worse beat upward at her from each jarring footstep.

Watch your own bones, she fiercely counseled herself as the trail steepened down from Phantom Woman's brow. The downhill trick of hiking. She stopped and tightened her laces so her boots were firm on her ankles and kept the toes from jamming. Then set a steeled careful pace, not to pound herself too much on the trail yet make steady time.

Her mind jittered back into the night, to the ashes, to the hours of furious thrashing. Lot of mental coin flips you have to do in life, and hers to throw Lyle to the winds for Mitch was one she would grab back out of the air of time if she could. Not that Mitch, damn him, hadn't flipped out, too. She knew it wasn't right to be as mad at him as she was at herself. But why couldn't he have just scattered those ashes, let Lyle blow away if that's what the old poot wanted? Lyle Rozier wasn't the first dubious choice to mingle into the earth. And likely not the last. Who appointed Mitch to be the decider?

She knew in the heart of her despair that he'd have said, ^gthey all did. The old holies of earthwatching, his laptop tribe of wordslingers. Muir. She breathed in as her right foot lifted. Leopold. Rhythmed the exhale to the stride of her left. Stegner. Her boot dodged a fist-sized rock in the trail. Abbey. The other boot set a firm mark into the dust-filmed ground. Bob--

--Marshall jounced down the identical shoulder of Phantom Woman, his bootprints an everlasting instant coinciding where hers were alighting in the dust of the trail, the bulging canvas pack on his back gray-shadowing her Kelty, she and he together breathing the thin air of not enough time.

Now that he was down out of sight of the fire tower and could write without setting off the nervous young ranger, he made himself stop. He batted a persistent horsefly from the vicinity of an ear, then creased open his notebook to this day's page, *June 21* ¹⁹~~39~~. Poor old notebook, nothing but interruptions today; lunch to smooth the ranger's feathers, and then that doozy of a close call on the stair landing. Shortcut to the parlor, of the funeral sort. But didn't happen. It will when it will, and until then, he would get away every chance he could, up here away from the swarm.

He did his sum of the miles hiked to the fire tower from where he had started that morning. To his category *Marker cairns observed on the Divide*, added a final three and their locations. Flipped through to the page where he kept his lingo tally, for a moment impishly pursing his lips at how the tower crew swore no stronger than seminary girls: half a dozen ^y*gollies* out of the ranger, Eliason; three uses of *sonofagun* by the blocky boy.

Done with those, he tucked the notebook in his shirt pocket and resumed his mile-^c eating pace. Three days earlier he had set out from Marias Pass, straight from his sleeper

on the Empire Builder to the trail up from the depot. He had wanted to follow as much of the Continental Divide as he could in the short week left to him before he had to go back to office life, to call it that. Reports to be written on this western swing and ^{be} seeded among his allies in the alphabet agencies in Washington. Life was this, the high lonesome; the other was obligatory existence. The chores of paper and committee. And then he had that trip to New York to make, its canyons the dead opposite of these wild passages.

At the gorge, Lexa made herself stop and drink from her water bottle. Hat off, to let the sweat dry. Handful of trail mix to munch while she willed herself to rest briefly. The wind gusting with wicked swirls through the gorge for some reason brought back the time on the Anaktuvuk River. How, for the eight days of toughing out hunger in the sleeping bags, it had blown in the Brooks Range, coursing over her and the others in its running start north across Alaska ^{through} ~~to~~---

--the *Gates of the Arctic*, was his first entry in this summer's well-creased notebook, and since then the California mountains and the Cascades up through Oregon and Washington ³ and now the old loved Rockies, all of it to take the miles and words back with him to what passed for civilization.

He shifted the balance of his pack to the inward side of the trail, away from the drop of the gorge. Already he could taste missing this, the continent's center of gravity, the high wild equilibrium in these mountains. An earth all lowland, entirely gentle and cliffless, invited engineering and the tame patterns of residence.

He hiked on, the flavor of the day a little off, weary already of the next scrap ahead when he returned East. The old bulls in the regional offices resented him and the Primitive Area designations his division was pushing on them, he knew that. Bob Marshall needs more seasoning, they kept writing in their reports at every point of his hopscotch career through the Forest Service. But country like this was worth pushing for. The swarm didn't need it, couldn't even make much use of it, yet would manage to riddle it with needless roads, peckerpole logging, the maws of mines, dry-hole wells, if it wasn't set aside.

Hard to get the wilderness idea across, though. It was only fifty-fifty among even the CCC lads up there on Phantom Woman, where you could see mountains all the way to kingdom come. In the look on the Italian one he had caught a schoolboy reflection of himself, back in Adirondack summer vacations when he and his brothers were scampering up every peak. The other boy, nothing doing. The top of his world was not the Divide.

"Hey! Yo! Anybody?"

With some daylight to spare but not much, Lexa came within sight of the fishing camp. At the top of her voice she tried again:

"Hello? Anybody here?"

Of course not. Where were fly fishermen when they could be some actual use to someone? She tromped toward the creek. Alone. No help for it.

Her mind was operating desperately as she reached the ledge, jetty to the creek crossing, the cairn there. At her last glimpse of the Divide before coming down into the valley, Phantom Woman wore a foxfur of cloud. *Why don't I keep going. Grab a sleeping bag here and make some more miles. Screw the weather, it'd just be one night.* Half-panting, she stood by the stack of stones, the constant tumbling sound of the waterfall and the murmur of the creek at her weary feet holding her for a minute, long enough to realize those thoughts were breakneck. Catching her breath and herself with it, in forced calm she checked downstream ^{toward} ~~to~~ the tepee. She'd almost have sworn she could feel someone else around, but the camp stood there empty. Funny how she didn't want to let go of company which all too plainly wasn't there. That was what she had given Mitch hell about, over Lyle, wasn't it. Nobody said life is all one straight line. Resolutely she put her mind into list form. She was going to have to rest, get a strong meal into herself, crawl

into one of those mauled sleeping bags and spend the night under shelter. As soon as there was any light at all in the morning, get going on the long last lap down out of here.

There. Back to sanity. Revive herself before pitching camp and she had it made.

She knelt to throw water on her face.

The grizzly rose in the upstream brush not a hundred feet away, out of her line of sight but less than a minute from her if it decided to charge.

Mingled human smells came to it and the dark rounded ears were alert, instantly triggered to territorial threat. Behind the great jaws a low steady *urrrr* sang in the throat. Standing to its full height to peer in her direction, the bear moved its head, size of a man trap, from side to side. Eyesight was the bear's only sense that was not powerful. Almost lost in the wide furry head, the eyes tried to bring in the puzzle of shapes at the edge of the water.

Constrained by her pack, Lexa shrugged out of it, put it beside her against the monument. Remembered she would need water to cook with over there in camp, and still on her knees, dug into the pack to retrieve the cooking pot and save a trip back to the stream. Then put herself around to the rushing water again.

The other creature watched, only the fur on its humped back moving in a ripple of breeze. There at the water it discerned more than a single form, then one, now more than something alone again. The shifting shapes confused the grizzly.

Lexa stripped off the sweatshirt, chucked it up onto the cairn. Stuck her hat up there with it. Now rolled her shirtsleeves partway up and dabbled her hands and wrists in the water. Bracing herself, she dipped water onto her face, the cold against her skin making her gasp.

To the bear, the standing figure had grown, the other mysteriously moved close to the ground. Now the smaller shape was up, merging against the other, they became a single large form in the bear's field of vision.

In ancient instinct of ceding ground to the unknown, the grizzly dropped to all fours and vanished upstream. Lexa kept at her water chores, shielded by the standing stones.



Mariah woke in the night to a sound like a sandstorm sifting hard against the outside wall.

She lay there trying to get her bearings. Couldn't be, she tried telling herself. Not again. The grit of Mount St. Helens' ash cloud hitting the siding of the house she and Riley had at the time in Frenchtown, west of Missoula, a full 36 hours after the eruption.

Spooked and blinking, she wildly sat up and sorted dream from darkness. Not St. Helens. Not Riley. The sting of rain, this was, and Mitch prone as a chopped log over there the other side of the cabin.

She listened to the rain, which sounded as if it was here to stay awhile. No drippedy-drip pattern onto floor or table yet, but she didn't dare have much more faith in the elderly roof of this place. She got up and stoked the fire, undid the tents from Mitch's backpack and her own, spread one over him to make sure he stayed dry, did the same for herself. Then lay there to wait for dawn, knowing any more chance of sleep was shot.

"What time did she go?" Mitch right away had wanted to know when he came out of his stupor. By then he had slept so far into the morning that she had about chewed the inside of her mouth out, waiting for him to come to so she could see how he was.

"Five, a little after." And right away she had told him Lexa intended two days out, to try to take at least some of the long chore of time ahead of them off his mind. He said nothing to that.

She'd had to spend much of the day down out of the tower scrounging firewood. As she kept making trip^s up the stairs with armloads, he caught on that she was stoking in much more than two days' worth.

Played out from packing wood but satisfied that whatever else happened they wouldn't freeze to death up here, she managed to cook a noodle meal with much frowning at the instructions on the package. Mitch ate out of duty rather than enthusiasm, she saw.

She was braced for it when he said the next.

"What got into her?" Tone as haggard as the rest of him.

"Lexa was trying to...close the book on your dad for you." Mariah picked her words carefully. "You have to admit, Mitch, there's a lot more than one side to that argument. I mean, you and I had it out with each other in ^{the} worst way yesterday."

"Job stuff, that was. You just wanted your picture. That I can live with[?]--if our situations had been reversed, you know damn well I'd have jumped all over you for the story I thought was coming to me." His face was set in a wince. "But she wanted to let him go ahead and be the Archangel Lyle. Write his own ticket into ever after. Fly off over all this, like his ashes were Gandhi or somebody."

"Take it a little easy, okay?" she said nervously. Elevated blood pressure entering into this already not great medical picture, she did not want.

"Where did she ever get the idea it was up to her?" He didn't sound toned down.

"Sort this out with her later, can't you? After we're down out of here."

"I don't see how."

Now she could hear the first drops of a leak, direct hits on one of the packs from the sound of it. *Right*, she thought wearily, *all we need next is for those ashes to get wet and dribble out on the floor*. She went over and moved the packs to the other side of the cabin, then poked the fire to life again. While she was at that, a fresh drip started on the tent spread over her sleeping bag, so she dragged everything there under the far end of the table. "Leak like a fucking sieve," she told the tower under her breath, "see if I care."

Enough gray daylight had come that she could look out at the swirling curtains of rain and tell that Phantom Woman was weathered in for the day. Sometimes these squalls merely played along the Divide, didn't gravitate into the valleys, out toward the plains. Sometimes but not most times. Mariah's mouth was dry with worry. It was going to be a scummy enough day in the shelter of the cabin. It would be liquid misery for Lexa out there in miles of mud and wet scree, already bone chilled when she'd have to wade that creek behind Jericho Reef. And wade it again. And again.

Mariah tried to think of something she could be doing. Yesterday her dance card had all too much on it; the firewood supply, figuring out food, alternately tamping Mitch down and trying to cheer him up. Today looked like it was going to be Zombie Junction around here. Mitch was still heavily asleep, that was fine, that was good, just so long as his chest kept rising and falling. She put her head down on the table to try to nap.

She would have sworn it was no time at all later, a few swift thoughts tangling in and out of places on the trail and the rain falling onto the cabin and into it and streaming off Lexa's hat if she was okay and up and going, when she lifted her head to check on Mitch. And jumped a little when she saw he was awake and had been watching her

"I'm falling down on the job here." She stretched to unkink herself and tackled breakfast. "How do you like your oatmeal, one lump or two?"

"I'm not very hungry anyway." Nothing he could have said would have worried her more.

But after she coaxed, he ate some and came to life enough to uncomfortably shift what he could of his body, which seemed determined to kill him of back ache if the rest of this didn't get him. "Prop me up some more, could you?" he asked with a groan.

She rolled up her sleeping bag and mat together and lodged it for him to rest his back against. That done, they sat and looked out at the dishwater day.

"Not doing us any favors today, is it," Mitch offered.

"None that I can see."

"Know what?"

"What?"

"Whiskers are a terrible invention." He fiercely scratched his facial stubble.

The start of a grin wouldn't stay off her lips. "You'll never make Hutterite."

"Yeah, well, another career advancement shot to hell." Making talk, Mitch did not look quite as much of a wreck. Mariah had the impression that, whatever kind of medicine words were, keeping up the conversation was having a bracing effect on her, too. And then it came. One thing led to another and something else and back around again a little closer to the heart of matters each time until they found themselves spilling to each other in earnest. Colin made it into the conversation (*But all his smarts were from the neck down*) and Jocelyn (*The only gene we seem to share at all is the shape of a rollerblade wheel*) and Ritz across his chosen oceans (*Jakarta! Hey, I dropped a bundle of Fuji expense money on interpreters there, I wonder if...*) War stories of work, past ("*Bingford, the ship that left us sinking rats*") and imminent (*So now with the museum residency and the book and the Montanian I've got three sets of deadlines people want to kill me over*). He stared at the ceiling as he put together his rendition of his father (*There just was never any halfway, with him. You either sided with him in chasing his next rainbow or you hit the road*). She leaned forward with a sad smile to deliver herself of her ex-husband (*If I lived to be a thousand I could never be as sure about anything as Riley was about everything*). Crusoe and Friday. Lara and Zhivago. They talked away the rain, talked away the tremendous hours. The only inflection that fell flat between them all that day was Lexa's name.

And that night, Mitch asleep at last, before crawling into her own sleeping bag
 Mariah stood by the stove, her crossed arms hugging her chest as if clinging to herself.
 The sum of this day was complicated enough to make her cringe. Perturbed as she was
 about the alarming new feel of this between Mitch and her, she was also dizzied with it in a
 way she wouldn't really have traded, intrigued as a person can't help but be by an
 unexpected avenue of the heart. The oldest contrary symptoms. (The whole while
 repeating to herself that this was stupid. Nursie in the tower and her patient swooning for
 her because that was all in the world he had to occupy himself with. *Stupid squared--there
 are two of us.*) She absolutely would have rather eaten dirt than cut in on Lexa. But
 everything about this was doing its utmost to cut in on Lexa, was it not.

She looked over at Mitch's pack where the box of ashes rested. *You monumental
 old SOB.* Whatever Lyle had had in mind, his grasp at Phantom Woman was jerking
 everybody's strings in unintended directions.

~~##~~
 Morning three was clouds, lapping at the summit of Phantom Woman like an
 inconsistent tide.

Cork on a white sea, the lookout tower was riding atop a lid of weather. At
 moments Mariah could see the filled-in expanse, cottony and thick, with only the topmost

shards of other peaks sticking through like offshore ~~seastacks~~ in fog. The rest of the time a milky haze teased around the tower and she couldn't even see down to the ground.

Give us a break, she thought, not confining the command to the cloud lid.

She checked on Mitch again. Rise and fall of his chest, the helpless grandeur of his big face in sleep against Lexa's pillowed sweatshirt.

Mariah puffed out her cheeks in exasperation at the prospect of another set of hours like the past forty-eight, then told herself to get with it, feed the fire, feed Mitch whenever he woke up. She was about to turn from the window and its panorama of murk when she heard the noise.

Lexa's cruddy blue ~~jeans~~, soaked onto her three times in fordings of the last creek, felt to her like she'd been born in them, had she been born in a barn. Her feet, plastered with moleskin, were like toothaches at the wrong end of her. She had never been so tired in her life and at the same time never so wired.

The noise inside the helicopter was a constant chopped-up thunder. She was belted in behind the ~~co-pilot~~ where the fourth member of the Malmstrom Air Force Base rescue team usually rode; she was the one who knew Phantom Woman.

Out on the observation platform Mariah craned her neck, trying to glimpse the source of the blade noise which sounded close enough at times to cut the roof off the tower. Now came the loudspeaker voice:

"We don't have enough visibility to land. Medic Gorman is coming down to you on a line. When he has the patient ready, we're going to lower a basket sling and bring the patient up in that. Stand by."

A hideous groan erupted out of Mitch. Mariah whirled to him.

His eyes were wide and staring. He asked:

"How much does a piano weigh?"

~~##~~
The medic sedated Mitch and jockeyed the stretcher-like basket down from the helicopter with a stream of talk into his helmet mike. "I've got to go up next and see to him," he shouted to Mariah over the helicopter roar. "Then we send down the sling harness for you. Buckle yourself in good and tight, understand? Then give us the high sign and we reel you up."

Mariah looked abstracted, hunched, staring off into the field of fog. The medic frowned. "Are you all right?"