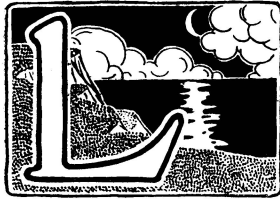


6. Sidetracked

Lina is still trying to accept the fact that the life she had planned with her late husband will never happen. Beneath her composure she is emotionally fragile. Although usually responsible, on a whim she has agreed to allow Heiger to take her on a scenic detour.



Lina had no idea where she was. Somewhere Heiger had taken a side road that wound through unfamiliar mountains. She knew the road her father always took, but she didn't really have a working map in her head of the territory between Serinand City and Mirsand, where her parents lived.

It seemed as if they were going down more than up, although she suspected the mountains they had just been through were fairly high. There was snow about two thirds of the way down the mountains, but none sticking to the lower third. They were heading down towards the floor of the valley, and about to wind around a mountain.

They came close to the floor of the valley as they rounded the mountain. At the bottom of the valley ran a small river that was rushing in the same direction they were going. After about another hour they started going up again, but Lina noticed something odd; there was no snow to be seen even at the tops of the slopes that she could see, and the rocky slopes were better-covered in vegetation than was usually the case. They were too close to the hills to see over them to the higher slopes, but still, this seemed a bit odd. Especially as they were going up and still not seeing any.

Another hour and they were going down again. Around another mountain, and then a green chasm opened up to them as they descended from a ravine into a deeper valley.

“Where are we?”

“We’re about to enter the Winterhaven Valley.”

“Is this the stop you wanted to make?”

“Not yet.” For him, that was informative. He didn’t just say “no”. “Not yet” meant that there was something more wonderful than a valley that is green while most of the rest of the northern hemisphere was frozen. Even stranger, they were already significantly further north than frigid Serinand City.

The complex pattern of seasons on the Homeworld made it impossible for the native flora to determine when it was time to drop leaves and when it was safe to grow new ones. The most common adaptation to the erratic climate was to simply fold up their leaves during cold weather and to unfold them during mild weather. The leaves in this valley were all unfolded.

The valley ended in another valley that was a little deeper still. Lina guessed that this was the Winterhaven Valley. It was relatively narrow with irregular curves that obscured its full length. Although she couldn’t tell exactly why at the moment, it was significantly different than the already unusual side-valley that they just left, beyond just being broader and deeper.

After watching the scenery go by for a while, she spotted one difference. Just about anywhere on the land surface of the Homeworld, the flora was just about the same as anywhere else, with minor variations for latitude and altitude, and some over great distances. That was because there were no climactic or geographic barriers strong enough to have created distinctive plants peculiar to any single region. Although most of the trees here were familiar to her, perhaps a quarter of them she had never seen before, and to her eyes they were very odd.

There were trees—if indeed they could even be called trees, for they did not seem to have distinct trunks and leaves—whose greenery did not

look as though it was capable of folding up to protect it against cold. Lina suspected that the name of the valley implied that it was always warm here, but how this could be possible was a mystery to her.

Lina noticed something else peculiar about this valley. With so much plant life, and the native rock in beautifully marbled shades of dull red, salmon, and a pale yellowish brown, the valley walls were more colorful than on most of the planet. Here and there where she could see down to the floor of the valley, she spotted a body of water that looked unnaturally blue-green. The whole thing was more vividly colorful than what she was used to.

Such views as there were disappeared as the road descended into what for the Homeworld was dense forest of unusually tall trees. For the next few hours, Lina felt as though she had been spirited away into an enchanted forest of mythic proportions.

After a while, the forest began clearing again, and she could see water again. It looked like a river, but if it was it must have been slow-moving if in fact it was flowing at all. The water made its way around numerous islands as well as peninsulas extending into the water from the sides of the valley. Heiger took a side road that headed down to the water. When they reached the banks, he set the wagon down and prepared it for water travel, then headed into the water. The wagon now swam like a sea-iguana, with the cab held up to stay clear of the water. Oddly enough, some trees were growing right out of the shallows of the water. Lina had never seen Mangroves before. The beach from which they departed the land was one of the few clear of obstacles.

Although they were now at the very lowest spot in the valley, they could see better because they were now clear of the trees. Lina wondered if the point of traveling by water was in fact for the view. It was a beautiful day for cruising.

They passed a few islands, but eventually came to one where Heiger drove the wagon ashore. He must have known exactly where he was going, since most of the islands had no beach, their edges ending abruptly in low but almost vertical cliffs. This island was like that on one side, but the other was mostly sandy beach. The beach was covered in Mangroves, but here they were far enough apart, in places, for the wagon to negotiate through them. Heiger drove the wagon along the beach for a ways, and then stopped.

The beach in this spot was interesting. Neither cliff nor flat, it was expanses of sand interrupted now and then by large rocks jutting abruptly out of the sand. The buttressed roots of the mangroves were high enough to walk right under most of them, and they were far enough apart to walk around them too. Heiger asked Azer "Are you ready to go wading?" Azer nodded, then Heiger grabbed Azer and exited the cab. Lina opened the door on her own side of the cab, and was greeted by a new phenomenon that surprised her.

For the first time in her life, she was hit by a wall of muggy air. In the warm season, this would not have been unusual in most of the low-to-mid elevations of the Homeworld, but she had lived her whole life in Mirsand and Serinand City. Mirsand was a northerly city and was situated on the shores of a large freshwater sea. It never got very hot. Serinand City was just north of the tropics, but its high elevation kept it cool and somewhat dry even in the warm seasons. Lacking the big lake and winter cloud-cover of Mirsand to buffer the temperature, and sitting at a much higher elevation, Serinand City was even colder in the cold-seasons.

Not wanting the cabin to get hot, Lina regained her senses and quickly got out of the cabin and closed the door. Heiger and Azer were nowhere to be seen. She wasn't quite sure what they were up to but guessed that sooner or later they would show up on the beach. She walked down to

the section of the beach nearest the wagon and found a rock to sit on while she waited. She looked out over the water at the other islands. The scenery was unusual enough to her eyes to occupy her for a few minutes, before she wondered about the island she was on, and started scanning the beach.

She spotted Heiger at a distance. He wasn't close enough to see clearly, but she was certain he was relieving himself among some rocks. She smirked as she turned her head and pretended not to have noticed. All she could make out of Azer was some movement and, barely, his excited little-boy voice. She suspected he was jumping around and nagging Heiger to take him swimming.

Azer reached her first. Luckily he was too noisy to sneak up on her, or he would have startled her coming up from behind. He threw his arms around her neck and immediately proposed beachcombing, swimming, and a picnic on the beach. She reached around and felt his smooth skin. She turned around and saw that he was wearing nothing. By urban standards he was a little old to run around naked, but in most rural areas on the Homeworld this was acceptable on the beach. Heiger was wearing a beach suit around his loins. She wondered why he would have such a thing handy on a work-related journey—but since he did seem to work hard she allowed that perhaps it was OK for him to play a little. No sooner had Heiger caught up when Azer dashed towards the water. Heiger ran after him, convinced that he was about to fling himself headlong into the water and drown himself.

Lina smiled, stretched out, and relaxed. It was nice to have someone else chase after Azer for a change.

First Lina considered how she would participate in this little adventure, and then she thought about time. Wasn't she supposed to be heading for Mirsand? Weren't her parents expecting her there tomorrow? Yes, that was true. Homeworld ethics, however, were lax in the matter of

mixing business with pleasure—indeed unless really pressed for time it was the norm. Although they wouldn't be happy if they realized that her chaperon had to cancel at the last minute and she had been traveling alone with a man, they need never find out. She didn't feel as though she were doing anything wrong. She got up and walked toward the boys, who were splashing around in the water.

“Heiger?”

He suddenly grabbed Azer and held him up out of the water. Apparently he didn't trust him while his attention was directed towards Lina.

“I'll go fetch some food from the hold, and get it ready. Are you OK with Azer for a few minutes?”

Heiger waved his hand in a gesture that meant “yes”.

She turned around, and heard a squeal and then a loud splash behind her. She hurried to the wagon so that she wouldn't have her back turned to Azer for more than a few minutes. As long as she was able to keep an eye on things, she felt comfortable letting Heiger take charge of Azer.

It was his own idea, not hers. His paternal instincts towards Azer might have been stronger than average, but not unusual among the men of the Homeworld. It was his initiative that set him apart. Men on the Homeworld could be protective of women and children, but usually only when the opportunity arose without much cost to themselves. Heiger had taken a chance when he rescued her from the mob—something that no other man in the vicinity had been willing to do. That was something that Lina appreciated.

Lina was thankful that Heiger's interactions with Azer were more playful than her own, and yet a little envious. She would have liked to have spent more time playing with Azer, but the dual responsibility of both providing and nurturing didn't leave a lot of time for play. It would have helped if her husband were still living.

Of course he had been the serious one. Lina was more playful. If he had been alive, and if by some miracle he had agreed to take an unscheduled detour strictly for fun, then she and Azer would probably have been treated to a discussion about the geography and geology of the valley. He probably would have figured out why the valley was so warm. The Homeworld lacked a concept exactly corresponding to “science” but had a similar one that could be translated “Discovery”. He had a good head for Discovery. Azer would have done well to be exposed to his father’s talent, but now they would both have to make do with what they had.

Azer was one of those children whose personality left his mother wondering whose son got switched out with hers in the nursery. Lina was fun-loving, but in a quiet sort of way. Her idea of fun was to read a tablet while cuddling her husband and son. Azer’s father was a kind and generous man, but serious and sedate. Azer wasn’t really a bad boy—he was enough of his father’s son never to get into any malicious mischief. He wasn’t particularly disobedient either. Instead, he was already completely out of sight before you turned around to tell him to stay close. Another of his famous tricks was to ask multiple questions in quick succession, at least a few of which were requests, before you could answer one of them.

She reached the wagon and pulled out the food cooler and a basket of picnic supplies from a storage compartment. She looked at the sensible things that she had packed—and wished it were something a little more “special”. The occasion seemed to call for a treat. She fetched a blanket to sit on, and headed back to the beach. She walked leisurely back to the beach seeing that Heiger’s attention was squarely on Azer as they played together in the water.

As she watched them having a good time, she felt her body finally let go of the tension it had since she left Serinand City. She wasn’t going to

worry about time. She would telegraph a message to her parents and tell them that she was fine, but also make up an excuse for her arrival to be delayed for some undetermined while. For now, everything seemed as it should be.