

Alone Again

"What do you mean?"

"Brin, I'm bleeding. I need to deal with it."

"How bad?"

"I'm not gonna die, but I'll need your help."

The look on her face was one I hadn't seen yet, so I couldn't tell what it signified.

"Ok."

I stripped off my shirt, and tossed it aside, then picked up a water bottle from the stack of supplies along the back wall. My shoulder was really starting to howl. I rinsed the wounds, unable to stifle a sharp intake of breath as the pain flared higher, and the blood-tainted water sluiced downward, soaking into the waistband of my jeans. I clamped my right hand over the cuts in an attempt to staunch the flow.

"What can I do?"

"Could you get the med-kit, please? I need to sit down." I was starting feel nauseous and light-headed as the pain increased, so I did, leaning back against the cave wall. Brin went unerringly to the go-bags, and quickly extracted the zippered red pouch from one of them, returning to where I sat with no trouble. She knelt down and unzipped it.

"What do you need?"

"Peroxide, superglue, gauze pad, and tape."

She sorted out the items by feel with quick fingers, and handed them over, the relevant question following right behind.

"What happened?"

"How bad do you want to know?" I spun the cap off the peroxide bottle, and dumped some into the cuts without waiting for her answer. The resulting tactical missile strike to my pain center drowned out whatever response she might have initially made. I screamed a curse, cutting it in half by sheer will.

"MOTHER-F--!"

She didn't flinch, just waited as I treated myself. The peroxide fizzed happily in the wounds, and I swiped it away with gauze. I closed first one, and then the second with the cyanoacrylate adhesive, holding each one closed long enough for it to set. I'm tempted to say I endured it stoically, but no, there were tears, and tiny screams, until I was able to tape the gauze over it all. The pain eased to a dull roar, and I leaned back. I focused back on Brin. She seemed to sense I was now accessible, but waited for me to speak first.

"Sorry about that. What?"

"I said, stop asking me that. I need to know."

I bristled.

"Why?"

She seemed mystified by the question, parroting it back as if it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

"Why? What do you mean, why?"

In truth, reader, riding the high plains of pain had temporarily bled most of my patience out of me. My initial response was savage, and almost made it to my lips before I wrestled it down. I didn't

answer while I evaluated alternatives. I did get to what I considered a lesser response, but it was still charged with anger.

"Why do you need to know? You don't have to see, or carry it. Why would you want to?"

She drew back from me, and I could see that my "lesser response" had an effect, but it was difficult to tell what it was.

To be honest, I did consider off-loading it all onto her right then. I was still in flames, and what would the world look like if I just let it all burn? What did I really owe her?

There was a beat, and I got part-way there.

"Brin, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm in pain. I'm sorry for taking it out on you. You need to know, and I'll tell you."

She called me on it.

"You keep saying sorry, but you aren't."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you aren't. Be honest. 'You don't have to see or carry it.' That's what you said. That was mean. Mean and sorry don't go together."

It felt like a slap, and it was. I ground my teeth together, because I knew she was right.

She moved us along.

"Tell me the real thing."

"I killed them. But I let a child escape."

Another beat.

I could see something resolve in her. It was nothing I could attach a label to. There might be emotionally astute people left in the world, but I wouldn't be counted in their ranks.

She sighed, and put out a hand, searching for something. She found my outstretched leg, and patted it exactly twice before retreating. She wasn't done, though.

She smiled, and it was as if I'd never seen the sun before. Then she gave me something more.

"Thank you, Jake."

The pain in my shoulder drove deep into the rest of me now, as it mapped new nerves, and decided to go where they went. It erased any early gains against, and I could feel a sort of frantic tension building in me.

"Any meds in there?"

Brin pawed out a couple packets of ibuprofen, and held them out. I tore them open, and washed them down with the last of the water in the bottle I'd used earlier, wishing I'd asked for them first. I couldn't stay silent, despite my desire to let my glimpse of the sun be the period at the end this.

"The kid did it."

"Did what?"

I felt the rage coming back up, almost indistinguishable from the pain, and couldn't divert it all this time.

"It was so close, but it went my way, one more time. Four up, four down. Another win. But the *kid*? You must've heard him. What was I supposed to do?"

My volume and intensity was rising, and I could see her shifting backward, her face resuming that warding away expression I was so familiar with. It was just gas on the fire, now.

"I gave him two free shots, because I wasn't willing to do him too. I was fucking *apologizing*! How's that for irony? You said it, remember? First day. 'This is a bad idea.' Remember?"

She didn't answer, just stared past me in that infuriating way that was in no way her fault, but I was too far in to stop.

"You were so right. The *fuck* are we doing here? Do I have to kill everybody now? He was just a kid!"

I realized I was crying, and it just made me angrier, and the pain fed the anger, and I could feel myself carried upward toward an unknown impact that would probably shatter me.

Brin abruptly leaned forward, feeling her way along me to ultimately grasp me in her arms. She pressed her head next to mine, and her quiet words halted the spiral.

"Stop, Jake."

I couldn't help but embrace her, despite the pain. She didn't stiffen, or resist, and one of her hands moved up to cradle the back of my head. She spoke again.

"I need to tell you a story."