

Human After All

She gently squeezed the back of my neck, but then retreated, once more putting the width of the cave between us.

The shroud didn't fall all the way back down this time. The fact that she drew back to the opposite wall was contradicted by the expression on her face. It was difficult to interpret, and the pain still ruled. The ibuprofen would take at least another twenty minutes to kick in, if it did at all. She wasn't looking at me, exactly, but I could sense her intent.

She didn't wait, and her words were a blessed distraction.

"I wasn't born blind."

She hesitated for a moment, as if she'd not started where she meant to, but continued on almost immediately.

"I know how you feel about my dad. Why wouldn't you? To you, he's the man who gave you a place to be...."

She stopped, and I could see the conflict, the search to define her version of me as it related to the back-story. Again, it was a short hiccup.

"Who you are, now, I guess. Then he passed me off to you."

She must have felt that I was prompted to respond, even though I didn't currently have that response queued up, and was fumbling around in myself to find it. She held up a hand. How is that possible?

"No, Jake. Just listen, ok? This is hard."

I nodded, and then added a vocal counterpart to it.

"Ok."

"I love my father. He saved me. And you. But you need to know, he didn't save everyone he could have. Including my mother and brother."

I didn't know what to do with that, and she didn't wait for me to respond. I could hear the pain in the last sentence, but she pressed forward with it, as if to preclude a response

"He built that place for the four of us, but only one of us survived it. Well, I guess two now, mister add-on."

It seemed like there should be some venom in her voice with that last, given the content, but there wasn't. She didn't stop.

"He built it while my mom was climbing the academic ladder at who cares now university, and my brother and I were slogging our way through who cares now prep school. Multiple tracks, right? The three of us tied in to a world that wouldn't last, and my dad off building his own.

He would drag us up there as often as my mom could stand it, even before it belonged to him. I've seen it. It's lovely, what I remember."

She stopped, and looked upward for a few long seconds. It was clearly a tears plus gravity subtract the route movement. She pulled it off, cheeks dry, though her eyes were still wet when she looked back toward me.

"They were opposites. Sort of like a dolphin and bear pair, but it worked. Mostly. Then I got hurt."

No mistaking the bitterness at the end. She looked away, even as she continued. Her tone seemed disinterested, but was at odds with her body language.

"Head trauma. I could give you all the details, but what does it matter? Blind is blind."

She didn't give me a chance to respond, which was fine, as again I didn't have one.

"Now the dolphin and bear have to deal with their wounded kid, rather than doing what they really wanted to be doing, and then friction does its thing. Heat, then fire, and then ashes."

She sighed.

"I haven't even told you about my brother yet, have I? Of course I haven't. I'm not good at this. He was the mom copy. I'm the dad copy. And that's how it shook out, right along party lines."

She looked down, and shook her head.

"He was such a disappointment to my dad. He had no interest in this."

She made a vague gesture with one arm, which I assumed meant everything around us. How could it not? This was Dave everywhere.

"Neither did my mom, really. While it worked between them she participated, made the best of it, and made sure my brother did the same. After the accident, not so much. I think that when my dad finally figured out that my mom was never going to follow him to his fortress of solitude, it wasn't long to reach the end, on both sides.

Then it was just us two up here."

She laughed, while the pain in my shoulder was eclipsed by another type of pain. It wasn't a one-to-one correlation, but close enough. A parent subtracted, and for her a sibling as well. Life was tough.

"Then this."

There was no humor in her laugh, and I could hear her slipping down into the real pain of it.

"He didn't go get them, when it all stopped. I begged him, but he didn't."

Then the tears started to fall. She didn't stop, though.

"He didn't go, Jake. He didn't go! HE DIDN'T GO!"

The last bit was a scream, and it was my turn to cross the distance between us, and take her in my arms. I had only my useless response for comfort.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She clung to me, and time passed until she came back. Then she disengaged, but without pushing me away. More time passed.

"I'm ok."

I could hear it was true. Her next statement was solid.

"You got the story. Now what do we do?"

"Good question."