

The Breaking of the Three, Part One

She could actually hear Jake grind his teeth, but he turned and retreated to where Bear waited. Her grandfather looked at her for what seemed a long time before he spoke.

"You do favor your dad, right enough. Walk straight ahead until I say stop."

She did, not meeting his eyes directly, until he said,

"Far enough. It's Brin, right?"

She nodded.

"Let's start with where's your father? I heard you two were livin' off-grid somewhere up Three Stones valley."

She felt the loss of her dad pass through her like a cold shadow, and the nicotine-coated words pointed towards irony. This old man was still standing, and her father had never smoked. She couldn't keep all the bitterness out of her reply.

"He's dead. Cancer."

Grant nodded, but she didn't respond or track the movement with her eyes. She was starting to get nervous, because this was a lot harder than she had anticipated. This was not playing out how she imagined at all. His next words were perfunctory, devoid of anything resembling regret or sympathy.

"Sorry to hear that."

Someone should tell your face. The thought was instant, and she almost met his eyes then. He went on with another question, keeping her from making the mistake. He pointed behind her, probably without thinking.

"And they are...?"

"They?" She was starting to chafe now, anger beginning to glow from the friction. It was clear her grand-father didn't have the same view of family she did. It made it even harder to not lock eyes with him. She didn't let him clarify, because she didn't need to.

"If you mean the men with me, they are friends who got me here. Here's one for you, now. Are my mother and brother here? That's why I came. I was hoping they made it out of Fall River. You were the closest place they could get to."

Once more, the lack of emotion on his face gave her the answer. She knew fully now that this had been not only a waste of time, but a big risk. Her heart sank as he shook his head. One more time, she did not track the movement with her gaze.

"Ain't heard from your mom in three or four years. Again, sorry."

The tacked-on apology was the worst part of it. The source of her father's enmity towards *his* father was now clear. She had made a terrible mistake bringing them here.

Two things occurred to her. The first was the home she'd hoped to find here she had already found prior to arriving. The other was that maybe she could walk this back, and leave the past behind her for good. She had never wanted to be in Jake's arms more than right now. But she was in it, and had to finish it.

"Yeah, me too. Thank you for agreeing to see me. I guess we'll move on. Nice to finally meet you."

She could see the gears turning in her grand-father's expression. The ambiguity present on his face stole hope from her in tiny increments of seconds as she waited for his reply.

Then, fate drove the last nail down. A ground squirrel bolted across the road between her and the assembly of men bracketing the old man, and the movement was so unexpected that she reacted without any thought. Even as her eyes tracked the blurred course of the tiny animal, she knew she had lost any chance of leaving this behind.

Grant Whitman reacted almost instantly. He shook his head, and his words were like cast stones as he held her gaze.

"Your dad was a liar, and so are you." His watery blue eyes didn't leave hers as he instructed his men.

"Take her. Kill *them*."

The archers raised their bows, and the other four rushed forward towards her. She only had a second to decide how to reply to her grand-father's edict. Once more, it was fight or flight. She went with fight. Anything she could do to even the odds just a little was really the only choice.

She shook her right arm downward, and her baton dropped out of the fore-arm sling Bear had made for her, the restraining string halting it perfectly placed for her to grasp the grip.

She flipped it out in the same motion as her back-swing, and she saw the man in front of the four widen his eyes. He tried to get his hand up to block it, but she stepped forward to meet him, closing the distance as she swung the steel rod towards his head with all the juice she could generate.

She'd been aiming for his neck, knowing there were all kinds of unprotected stuff in there, but the path of the baton brushed across the tips of his upraised fingers, and the impact happened pretty much dead-on his left ear instead.

She heard as well as felt portions of bone divorce themselves from other portions, and blood splattered outward as the impact shifted the man's trajectory slightly. He passed her by, stumbling and falling by the sound of it. She tried to re-set to strike at the next one, but there wasn't enough time. The next man was reaching for her before she could get another swing in when the back end of an arrow appeared in his throat. She only registered the sound of its passing by her ear after the fact.

This guy didn't change direction, however, and crashed into her, knocking her over. He didn't topple down on top of her, and she was yanked upright again by the next one in line. She saw the anger on his face as he punched her in the side of the head.

White light exploded in her mind, and then the dark came rushing back in. Just before she lost consciousness, a loud noise filled the world, accompanying her out.