

Dale

A third door opened, and it was clear to Brin that this one was access to the hallway in front of the cells. The sound of multiple foot-steps was temporarily over-written by Andrew's voice. It was full of the same coldness she'd heard a little bit of earlier.

"Hey, *dad*. Ready to gimme another shot?"

"Ain't in your best interests to push me any further, boy."

The sound of the voice made the connection she had been unable to make earlier, even as the other bright-white spark approached. Andrew sounded like his father, and she recognized the voice. It was the man on the white horse they'd met on the road. The ramifications of it unfurled in her mind. It made her very afraid, even as the charcoal mist evaporated, and her sight returned as two men stopped in front of her cell. She got visual confirmation before Andrew spoke again. When he did, it was clear he wasn't cowed at all.

"Like you care about my best interests.

Hey, Brin. Meet my father, Dale Lassiter, the asshole I was talkin' about earlier. Your grand-dad's here too."

She looked at them, and they looked at her.

The man next to her grand-father spoke.

"It's you. Ain't life weird."

She didn't answer, just waited to see where this was going. The man held the saltine packet of cubes in his hand, and Brin didn't bother to fake blindness now that she didn't need to. The glow of the three drew her gaze, but then she looked back up into those hazel eyes. This seemed to confirm something for him.

"So it's true. Wanna explain?"

Brin laughed out loud. She couldn't help it.

"Explain? Really? Are you serious?" Screw this, she thought. Taking the initiative made more sense. She diverted her attention to her grand-father first, pointing at him, hoping to flush out some information while she was at it.

"You're a dead man walking, I hope you know that." She swung back to the hazel-eyed man, finger moving back to indicate him as well. "You, too."

Her grand-father didn't react at all, and his boss only raised his eyebrows slightly as he responded.

"Yeah? That young buck and his pet silver-back comin' back for ya, then?"

He leaned towards her, and the menace she'd felt on the road was there again as he continued. It took all she had to not recoil, but succeeded. His response gave her some front-end hope, but she knew he wasn't done. What he said next would tell her what she wanted to know, though.

"They'd need an army, little girl. None a' them left around, though. What we really need to talk about is what these are."

There it was. Even as he raised the saltine packet, she knew Jake and Bear had escaped.

It was enough. Whatever came next, she knew she could get through. They were still out there.

And there was no way they weren't coming for her.

"Crackers?"

She did regret the joke when Dale shook his head, and her grand-father looked away.

Everything about it signaled a mistake on her part. What would the cost be?

Dale moved forward, anger clear on his face, intent on her.

Then Andrew intervened, and it was spectacular.

"Hey, *dad!* Catch!"

A metal bowl flew through the air from her left, and the sharp edge of it caught Dale in the forehead, blood misting outward and starting to flow down his brow even as it bounced away to clatter on the floor.

Brin had little experience with real fury. Her parents collectively, and then her father had buffered her from the world. Truth be told, Jake had done that too, mostly keeping her from the onslaught of those that would take what they thought was their portion of what was left.

She saw the rage ignite in Dale's eyes as he diverted from her, and redirected towards Andrew. Her instinct was to step in.

"Wait. I'll tell you what they are. Leave him alone."

Dale clenched his fists first, closing his eyes, but he stopped. Her grand-father was a statue, and she realized he didn't matter, and probably never had. She didn't need to factor him in anymore. There was a little relief in that, but also a sadness. Not for her, but for her father.

Dale looked back at her, blood running down his face. *This* was her enemy, and it would take everything she had to navigate this, if that was even possible. He spoke, and it wasn't what she expected.

"He's gonna pay, but he's my kid. Tell me, or don't. I'll figure it out. Don't need no little girl to tell me anythin'."

They stared at each other. Brin thought through a number of responses, but could only get to one. She needed to sell the safe side of it. She pointed at the packet he held.

"That's how I can see. One's a little, two together is more, and three is all the way. We found them on the way here. I don't know what else to tell you."

He stared hard at her, and his words were cold, like Andrew's had been.

"How about what else they do?"

Brin thought about her response, wondering if she was making the right choice. It came, but it felt like throwing a cube into the fire.

"What do I care? That's enough for me. Are you an idiot?"

His menace was clear again, and the blood on his face was somehow a red ribbon of accusation.

"No. You know I ain't. Are you?"

She put up her hands, and thought to diffuse the situation by acquiescing. It made the most sense.

But her anger got the better of her, and she didn't. Instead, she smiled at him, and said what her heart told her was true. She knew it would come at a cost, but didn't care.

"Jake's going to kill you, Dale."

