

Conscription

Dale just grinned at her before he responded.

"You think that's the first time I heard that? Your boy'll have to do better than a lot of folk, including Andrew, here. Right, son?"

Andrew laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"Ain't over 'til it is. Don't know this Jake guy, but I like him already."

Dale didn't respond, but seemed to take a second longer to go on than was necessary, and his grin disappeared. He looked at Brin.

"You can see 'em. I know you can. You got three put together, and we ain't even got but one, 'til you showed up."

She didn't answer and just stared back at him. But it was apparent to her that he knew more than he'd let on so far. She felt the hope of successful subterfuge depart, and the reality of her situation become clearer. He confirmed it.

"You had your chance to come clean, be helpful, like. You think I ain't figured it out? Like I said, don't need no little girl to explain it to me. I *know* what else they do."

Brin had no answer, no diversion, and no declamation of denial. She remembered on the road at their first meeting how confident he was in his unwillingness to accept anything he would deem a lie. All she could do was wait for him to make whatever proclamation he was leading up to. He did.

"You can find more of 'em for us. That's best for you. But it could be you make another choice. If so, then I got other things for you to do.

And maybe, when that young buck comes back, and you're right about him, and he finds you? Maybe you ain't worth finding. Think about it."

She looked then at her grandfather. He didn't return her gaze, just looked forward as if this had nothing to do with him. It was a wonder to her that her own father had survived the indifference of a man like that. The idea that a father could become this version of a human being to his family hit her hard. She remembered what Jake had told her about his own father. It kindled a deep rage within her. Nevertheless, she held it within the center of herself, and didn't allow it to show on her face.

She was about to respond when Andrew spoke up again. Besides the cold, there was hardness in his voice that she hadn't heard yet. His desire had seemed to solidify beyond intent to certainty, and there was something else in his voice that caused Dale, her grandfather, and even her to look in his direction.

"Gonna suck to be you soon, I think. If this guy don't get you, I will, 'less you do me first.

How's that feel?

Ma loved you. She told me. Don't understand it, 'cause all you ever showed me *and* her was you first. *Then*, you let her die. I fuckin' *hate* you. I don't care how you get yours, long's it happens."

Brin could almost see Dale sorting through responses until he got to the one he finally chose, and it did not address anything Andrew had said. His eyes returned to hers, instead.

"Tomorrow morning, two of my guys are takin' you out for a walk. Find me some more of these, they'll leave you alone. If not, then, well...." He shrugged, and turned to go.

She knew she was in deep shit. Self-preservation and adrenalin linked arms, and her mind up-shifted. Once again, she was going to have to lie her ass off to sell it.

"Are you *kidding* me? We got three across 150 *miles*. You think I'm going to walk down the street here and find one?"

You might as well just let your guys into this cell. They're going to have to beat me bloody, though, to get what they want. I guarantee it. Not sure how that helps you get what *you* want."

Dale looked back at her, and the expression on his face gave her a sudden insight that surprised her.

Dale was a bad man, it was clear. But he was also a complex man. And complexity spoke to inner conflicts. His next statement confirmed it.

"Sounds like maybe a counter-offer in there, somewhere?"

She didn't hesitate.

"I'll do what you want, but you can't expect me to deliver something I can't find if it's not there."

His hazel eyes narrowed, and she could see the war inside. His power required results, and if he could not order the world to produce them, then his grip would seem weak. He could not allow that, and he stated as much.

"Your word that it's so ain't worth much to me."

"Fine, Dale. You get that we've got no place to go from here, right? You believe I can do it, but you won't believe me if I say there aren't any that I can find."

He thought for a few moments, and then swept a hand out before him.

"What, then?"

Brin felt calm, oddly enough. It was like she was in the eye of her own emotional storm, with a blue sky visible up above, but the maelstrom whirling around the edges. She knew what she wanted.

"I'll look for you, and deliver them up if I find them. But Andrew comes along. Every time."

"No."

"Then fuck you. Do what you're going to do."

Dale actually looked puzzled.

"Why?"

"Because, I'll have a friend. And it won't be just me against your goons if they decide to push the time-table."

"If I tell them they can, he won't matter."

"Says the loving father."

Andrew laughed again.

This was the closest she'd seen to Dale losing his shit. Anger, and other less-identifiable emotions played out on his face. Yet he schooled himself, and when he looked at her again, his eyes were clear.

"I'll give you a week. If I don't get another one by then, you get all the things you're thinkin'."

He gestured towards the cell next to her.

"He needs to get out, anyway. Ain't worried about that."

His eyes narrowed again as he looked at her, the blood from the gash in his forehead starting to dry to a dark crust.

"I get you hopin' for a rescue. Ain't gonna happen."

"Whatever you say, Dale. One last thing, though. I'm going to need two of those to get you what you want." She indicated the saltine packet of her cubes he held. He shook his head.

"Why would I do that?"

Brin felt her anger spike, but tamped it down again the best she could. Walking this bridge between truth and lies was exhausting. Her sarcasm was clear.

"I'm sure you think you know how this works. I mean, I only *lived* it so far, but go ahead, explain it to me."

Dale tensed again. She could tell that he wasn't used to making concessions, or being spoken to in this way. But then he relaxed, and moved closer, looking through the bars.

"One of my guys'll carry them for you. I'll tell him to stay *real* close."

He paused, then continued.

"Y'know, I hope you can find 'em. But part'a me hopes you cain't."