

Being brave just means you cry where no one can see you. Did you know little kids used to fall down wells and die not so many years ago, right here in America? Lassie go get help, Timmy's in the well. For real. I fell down my well when I was five years old, only my well had a whole other country at the bottom. Not literally, of course. My Mom had packed me up and sent me off to live with my Aunts in North Carolina, good old USA. All I really remember about her is that she made me speak English- no Greek allowed in the house, and that she always smelled a little bit like freshly turned garden soil.

She hadn't been wrong about America though. This place has everything, good and bad. Up to you whether you get more of the former than the latter, I guess.

"Lorel, get in the truck. You're stalling." Dale was just sitting there in the driver's seat, looking like he was ready to put down roots before he moved. Maybe literally.

"You just want to go out there because Dryads aren't allergic to poison ivy," I pointed out. "And they're easy." Yeah, he was right, I was stalling.

"And? I was going out to see your cousins either way. You're the one who wanted to come. It's family, Lor."

Family. I got in and sat down.

Breathe in, breathe out. Stay in the moment. Don't let the past ambush me, that's all I had to do. Buckle up and remind myself that this too, shall pass. This seat had upholstery, it wasn't layered canvas over metal over a burning hot battery case. There was no lingering scent of spilled JP8 here, just some empty beer cans rattling around in the bed. I picked at the worn spots in the fabric. Just two and a half hours in a '96 Ford F150 trying not to remember, that's all.

“I can hear you thinking over here, Lorel.” Dale put the car in reverse with a distinct thunking sound that meant he’d be shelling out for a new clutch in the next few months.

I stuck my finger deep into the seat, digging out a chunk of yellowed foam and tossing it in his direction. “What, did you create some new superpowered mind-reading plant?”

“Not yet.” Dale is amazing at what he does, which is research. Most of his published work involved studying what had been done to his own body, but that was a subject too touchy to bring up. Ever. His work on interspecies grafting was groundbreaking though. At least so I’d been told. I’m a history major, I wouldn’t know.

All of which was beside the point, and I knew it. “Damnit, Dale, you been drinking and driving again. You’re gonna get so busted someday, and who’ll bail your ass out?”

That got a chuckle out of him. “You will. Besides, I wasn’t driving this time. Me and some guys went out to a bonfire, and we didn’t want to leave the trash in the middle of the woods.”

What happens when kill someone with your stupid, fuckface? What then? I can’t say that though, not without leaving “again” hanging silently in the air afterwards. It wasn’t worth it. He knew he was wrong.

The thing is that once you’ve seen someone pick up a rifle and prove they can kill someone, you have two choices. You trust them completely, no matter how damned stupid and hardheaded they are, or you kill them before they kill you. Dale is my brother in war, tighter than any blood.

“We can stop and drop off the trash before we hit the highway.” Coming from him, this was both a peace offering and an apology. Most of the time, us talking is more about what we don’t say than what we do. Go figure.

Two hours to go.

I didn’t bother to speak again until we’d stopped at the Sheetz and he dumped out the trash. Dale, on the other hand, went on for quite some time about what he’d gotten into and then gotten himself back out of over the weekend. Thirty-two years old and still up to no good. Some people never really grow up. While he was cleaning up his mess, I went inside and bought us both some Mountain Dew and pork rinds for the rest of the ride. Once we left town, there wouldn’t be anything for miles but trees, mountains and small town cops. Climbing in the passenger seat wasn’t nearly as hard the second time, thankfully.

That reminded me of something. On the subject of cops... “I talked to Andy while you were out having your adventure.”

“Really? What did he want?”

“Actually, I called him this time. Took the bus all the way up to Raleigh,” I was kind of proud of that. “I pulled my usual pot smoking punk act for him.”

Dale laughed. “How is that an act?”

“Motherfucker.” He was still smirking at me. “Don’t start with me. The point is, I wanted to know about those supposed meth heads who OD’d last Thursday. One of my guys mentioned that something seemed off. Five grand if I can figure out the what and how.”

Dale stopped laughing. “The two on the news the other night? With the kids that got left in the apartment with the bodies? You’re crazy, woman. That’s right next door to that witch’s house. You want to wake up dead?”

“Not really. So far I’m turning up nothing but dead ends, anyway. Andy didn’t offer anything more than what the news put out. You know how it is, magic polices its own, he can’t do anything, don’t get busted. Wasted trip. I’m gonna to have to head down there myself, I guess, if I want to make any money out of this. Five grand, Dale, that’s a lot of money.”

“True, but I don’t know about this. It’s one thing to-“

“I wasn’t asking your opinion.” I cut him off, ignoring the dirty look he shot me.

“Consider it noted.” Some of us didn’t have fancy jobs and security clearance.

There was no point in talking about it now, not when I was already on edge. I really didn’t want a fight with him. The thing is, you don’t find peace with fear- you make it, and I had a long ride ahead of me.

