

3. The Range

Sylvie turned and ran another lap on the high school field. The broad, painted track rushed under her hooves as she galloped at full speed, the wind grabbing at her hair and holding it in the air. Her entire focus was on the course and controlling her breathing. Her horse lungs sucked in enormous amounts of air as she raced, a little ragged after her third lap. Sylvie pushed herself all the harder. Here on the track, her nightmares had no power over her. Here, or at the range, she could banish them completely. She was free.

As the finish came up, she saw the broad-shouldered figure of her father waiting near the finish line. Slowing to a walk, she passed the line without stopping and held a single finger up. He nodded and walked to a nearby bench to let her do a cool-down lap. Sylvie's mind buzzed with questions as to her father's appearance. Besides her first three nights home, Sylvie had seen him and her mother only in passing since. The sheer amount of work involved in rebuilding the town had him staying till midnight at the office, if not all nights. Her mother's caseload had increased, and the upcoming trials of the gang members involved in Taryn's mother's kidnapping and starting the riot hadn't allowed much time to be home. Sylvie had been left alone at home for most of the time, with only her nightmares for company. Several times she had thought about calling or going to Taryn's, but she wasn't sure she was ready for that yet. Taryn was happy with her mom; she didn't need her coming over and complaining about a few harmless nightmares!

"Hey dad." Sylvie said, finishing her lap and coming to the bench. She grabbed her towel to pat herself dry. The foam on her body she would have to wash off at the garden hose near the school building.

"What brings you here?"

He looked terrible, Sylvie noticed. He looked thinner than she remembered, there were dark bags under his eyes and his hair had a slightly matted appearance, as if he hadn't had time to properly shower. The smile he gave her though was warm and happy. "You do." He said cheerfully. Exhaustion tinged his voice, though his eyes were bright. "I was finally able to sneak out my office window and get down the fire escape unseen. My afternoon is now yours, sweetheart."

“Dad! Really?” Sylvie was shocked and elated. She grabbed him in a fierce hug. Sylvie thought she heard his ribs creak in her tight grip. Face flaming in mortification, she quickly let him go. She watched him anxiously, afraid she had hurt him. He gasped slightly, wobbling on his feet. She was relieved when he laughed and dropped his hand.

“So, what are you going to do next?” He asked.

“Well, um. I was going to go and do the shooting range actually.” Sylvie said.

“Sounds good. We’ll go together.”

Sylvie was delighted. After washing up, they walked to the house to pick up her gun. They talked about how the reconstruction was going. Her father muttered something incomprehensible about tight-fisted bean counters in Washington D.C., and Sylvie laughed. It was surprising to realize how much she had missed laughing from pure joy. There hadn’t been much to laugh at in the show.

At the house, Sylvie went to her room to grab her Winchester rifle and cowboy hat. Both had been part of her costume while she was Nightshade’s. She kept the gun because it was comfortable to shoot and extremely accurate at almost any range she chose. The outfit she kept as a reminder of what she had been, and what she had gone through. Each time she wore it, it felt like another victory over Nightshade, a feeling she desperately needed. The hat she kept because it kept the sun out of her eyes. Nothing more. Fully equipped, she stepped out of her temporary bedroom in the garage and saw her father stepping out of the house with a holstered pistol in one hand and a couple boxes of bullets tucked under his arm. Sylvie felt her eyebrows try to climb past her hair. When had her father bought a gun?! She hadn’t seen that before.

“Where’d you get that, Dad?” She blurted out.

He looked down at the gun. “A long time ago.” He said quietly and sadly. Now Sylvie wanted to know more, but felt that it would be rude to ask more. She weighed whether it would be worth going ahead and asking anyway, and decided that it wasn’t worth ruining a good afternoon just to satisfy her curiosity. She could always ask him later.

Setting off for the Range, her father rode on her back with the gun holstered on his hip. The bullets she had him put in her carry bag that went down to her waist. Fully attired, Sylvie waited as her father

swung up onto her and rode bareback. Once she was certain he was comfortably settled, she set off to the Range.

Albert's Shooting Range was, fortunately, on her side of town, although much farther out. As she turned down Maple Street and went towards Fifth, people came out to look and greet them. Shouts of "Hey Sylvie!" and "How's it going Sylvie?" came from the crowd. Her father was also shouted at, although they ranged from simple greetings to questions about when the new businesses in town could move in. Sylvie frowned, wondering what they were talking about. Her father shouted back that it would be soon, and that they were in a hurry. Sylvie took that as her queue to break into a trot. Her father jounced around slightly, but he didn't complain.

Albert's Shooting Range had about sixty acres of range, including a smaller forested section that Albert used on weekends for the paintball enthusiasts that came out to war-game. It was the central hub for the Sheriff's department and a couple of the local gun clubs to meet and swap stories and guns. A steady stream of gunshots could be heard drifting on the wind, mostly the pops of rifles as people brushed up their skills for hunting season. Occasionally the deeper roar of a large handgun interrupted, but the rhythm of rifle fire continued unabated. Sylvie nodded to the attendant as she walked in. The girl froze as she looked up from her cellphone, jaw dropping almost to the floor. It was a shame really, the girl looked as if she could spend less time on the phone and more time caring for her teeth—they were stained and food was stuck on her metalwork. Sylvie didn't recognize her; she must have just been hired on.

In the range, Sylvie felt as if she had entered a clubhouse. The atmosphere was relaxed and casual, and people barely glanced at her before returning to their guns. Here, at least, no one treated her any differently than anyone else. Well, she amended to herself; they didn't treat her any differently because of how she looked. A few people waiting their turn on the line waved at her—over the two weeks she had become a regular there. Sylvie scanned the lines at the range and noticed they weren't all that long. It would only be a few minutes before they made it. Sylvie quickly paid the attendant at the counter for their turn and some extra ammunition, and then went to stand in line for one of the middle booths. Her father stood next to her, surreptitiously stretching his back and wagging his butt back and forth, trying to regain feeling. Sylvie had to turn her face so he wouldn't see her laugh. The young deputy ahead of them finished her turn in the stall and stepped out.

"Do you want to shoot first, hun?" Her father asked.

Sylvie shook her head and stepped back.

"I'll take that as a no." He chuckled. Stepping up to the firing line, he laid his pistol on the bench and pulled out a handful of ammunition. This was the first time Sylvie had had a chance to look at the gun, and she examined it carefully. It was much larger than she expected, with one of the longest barrels she had seen on a handgun. The bore was huge; Sylvie thought it must at least be a .45 caliber. Behind the barrel was the revolving magazine for six shots. The magazine clicked and fell out on the left side, readying it for loading. As her father tilted the gun Sylvie saw the name of the manufacturer on the barrel: Magnum.

Her father said nothing in response to her questioning glance. Instead he loaded the ammunition familiarly, popping the magazine back in with none of the spinning that amateurs and showmen liked to do. Ready, her father squared up with the closer of two targets downrange—a distance of fifty yards. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! The gun bucked in her father's hands, but was heavy enough that it absorbed most of the concussion. Splinters spun out from the target. The blasts were loud enough to completely drown out the sound of the rifles. When her father was finished, all sound on the range had stopped as people turned to see what had been fired. A few people shouted questions, and a steady stream of people ambled over to see the gun. Sylvie was far more interested in the target than the gun; the rounds had been tightly grouped near the heart of the target. She had had no idea her father was that good!

"Great shooting dad!" Sylvie said, fighting to be heard over the crowd without actually yelling.

"Thanks hun!" Her father replied. "It's your turn now, though!" He stepped back from the line, policing his brass before he went.

Sylvie stepped into the stall. She pulled out her Winchester from her back and laid it on the table. Running a practiced eye over it, she absently made sure it was in perfect working order and started to fill the magazine. A hundred questions swirled in her mind; where had he learned to shoot like that, and why? Where had he gotten the gun, and how had she never seen it before? Sylvie resolved to find out later, she no longer liked secrets, especially in those closest to her.

Shaking herself mentally, Sylvie pushed back all her thoughts and emotions away. A calm emptiness filled her. Voices around her faded into nothing; she was an arrow being drawn. She saw her target, at

least a hundred yards away. She believed she could see every hole in the target, and every marking. Smoothly—so smoothly—she raised the gun to her shoulder. She drew careful aim. POP! POP! POP! People's voices came to her as from far away, murmuring in admiration. From this distance, she could see little, but knew without seeing that there was only one hole. She spun around in her stall, making people step back. She swung the rifle over her shoulder. In her mind's eye, she could see the target, knew where it was, what it was going to do. POP! POP! Five rounds down, and her Winchester held ten. Facing back up to the target, she fired four more in fast succession, the blasts rolling over the top of one another. It still wasn't challenging enough. She spotted a metal pole marking one of the boundaries for the paintball arena. It being Friday it didn't seem likely that anyone would actually be there. Sylvie aimed. She knew where the bullet was going to go. "Sylvie, what are you—" Her father began nervously. She fired. Sparks flew off the pole. Several people cried in shock. A man quickly raised field glasses to his eyes as Sylvie lowered her rifle.

"Well?" Several people demanded. A large man stepped forward. Weather beaten and broad as a lumberjack, he appeared angry. "Where'd the bullet go John?" He said.

The man with the glasses was white as he slowly lowered them. "Straight into the neck." He whispered. "It stopped just a half-inch from passing through completely. I saw the glint." The range was silent.

"Honey, did you mean to do that?" Her father asked quietly. He was staring at her with a funny look on his face. If Sylvie had to judge, it would be awe tinged with fear. In the void, Sylvie didn't care.

"Of course." She said. "I wouldn't have fired if I hadn't known where the bullet was going to go."

"Sylvie, are you telling me you knew *exactly* that the bullet would go where you wanted it to go?" The big man, Albert, said slowly. He seemed stunned.

"Yes." Sylvie answered. She found the question insulting. She was no cowboy, to shoot unless she knew where the bullet was going to go. The constant training by Halls had paid off. Big time. People muttered to themselves as they stared at the target and then at her. A few of them refused to believe it; they ran down to see the target close up and came back white and tight-lipped, confirming that she had indeed placed every bullet in the bulls-eye and the last on in the neck.

"Let's hear it for Sure-Shot Sylvie!" Someone at last shouted. Sylvie started; she was stunned to hear her stage name here. A few raised a ragged cheer, although most seemed shocked into silence. Sylvie let go

of the focus and policed her brass. The sounds seemed louder to her now, the smells less sharp. Sylvie wasn't sure why that would be, unless that was a side-effect of what she liked to call the Void, after her favorite author's description of the emptiness. After resetting the rifle back into its sheath, she stepped out of the stall. A hidden tension immediately went out of her shoulders; she hated the confines of the stalls, it made her feel trapped again.

Sylvie and her father went to the small café that was next to the line, in the main building. It was, of course, named Albert's Kitchen. Sylvie had a large salad and water, while her father went for a big burger and fries. Sylvie was perfectly content as she ate, for obvious reasons meat just didn't appeal as much to her anymore. Although she had tried a bit of a hot dog after they had gotten home just to see if she could. Other than a foul stench in her backyard the next day, she hadn't suffered much in the way of ill-effects.

After lunch, Sylvie and her father went back up to the line and shot some more. Sylvie emptied five magazines downrange, performing all manner of trick shots that she had learned, much to the delight of everyone. Her father was more modest, preferring the classic stance and taking careful aim at the closer targets. His grouping was pretty consistent though, and Sylvie walked them home, mind abuzz with what she had seen.

As they walked up their drive, Sylvie decided she just had to know. "Dad," She started hesitantly, "I was wondering. Well, hoping really, that you would..."

He rescued her from her random groping for the way to properly phrase the question. "You want to know why I have the gun, right?"

Sylvie nodded. "And how you learned to shoot like that."

Her father patted her flank, she suspected he was smiling. "Come on dear, you forget I was raised on a farm and shot rabbits and other critters every winter for supper. I've been raised on guns since I was a tyke. As to that pistol..., " he shrugged. "I got that just after I met your mother. We were...rambunctious in those days. We ran wild for a few years, making our living fast and loose before we came back to Red Leaf. That gun got a lot of use in those days. Days that I would rather leave behind me."

Sylvie let the matter drop. It was clear from her father's tone that he wouldn't say more on the subject. It seemed like everyone had secrets around her. Even her own family. Sylvie was troubled as she

entered the garage while her father went in the house. She hung her rifle up and set the hat on the stand.

She turned over what her father had hinted at. Rambunctious, he had called it. What did that mean? She had thought her father had met her mom while in college. As Sylvie dug back in her memory, she realized that he had never actually specifically mentioned that. So, what had they been doing instead? Sylvie began washing up, wondering if she would ever find out. She needed to talk to Taryn. Taryn was always able to help her see the big picture when she focused on a pixel. Sylvie was afraid to interrupt her time with her mother, though. Sylvie resolved to check-in with Taryn tomorrow. Perhaps then, she could make sense of all this.