

5. A Warning is Given

Feeling more confused than when the evening had started, Sylvie went home. Arriving at the house, she was unsurprised to find it dark and cold. Her parents were late, again. Letting herself into her garage, she walked to her mattress in her corner and carefully set herself down. The springs groaned ominously, but held. She reached over to the small bookshelf that her father had moved for her after her...change. Pulling her favorite western novel down off the shelf, she tried to set herself free on the tales of Danielle Six-Feathers and her adventures in the Wild West. As her clock counted down the time, she was surprised to realize that it was already ten at night. She set her book down and listened intently. The house was absolutely silent. Sylvie sighed. Seemed her parents were going to spend another night in the office.

Sylvie walked into the house and to the kitchen. Reaching into the cupboard above the sink, she grabbed her toothbrush and squirted some paste onto it. Running her brush over her teeth, she started thinking about the range again. Her father had hinted at something in their wilder days; what could he have meant by that? She turned it over and over in her mind, but couldn't find any clues in the tangled mess of her thoughts. Each path seemed more convoluted than the last. Were her parents spies? Robbers? Cops? What?

Unsatisfied, she returned to her bed and tried to get some sleep. Sleep seemed impossible. Sylvie tossed and turned; a much more involved process than when she was human. At least back then, she wouldn't shake the floor or put holes in the wall if she wasn't careful. This was getting ridiculous. If this was such an issue, then she should just ask her parents. She could always ask them everything before, why not now? Various scenarios ran through her mind, ranging from her parents furious to them withdrawing from her completely. Sylvie thought that those seemed a little far-fetched. She had always been able to tell them everything, and they had always been there for her. Growling softly to herself, she rolled over and slowly drifted off.

Sylvie was running down a dark corridor. She was human again, but that seemed completely natural to her. She was so slow though! She needed her four-legged form, she wasn't going to get away fast enough otherwise.

Get Away? She wondered. Get away from what? Then she felt it, a evil presence behind her. It wanted her, she knew with terrifying clarity. It was after her; she had to get away. Desperately, she raced down the hall to an oaken door with a large brass handle. *If I can just get there ahead of it*, Sylvie reasoned, *I'll be safe*. She reached out with her hand, it was so close! Just a few more steps and she'd make it! The presence was closing it, she could feel it right on top of her. Suddenly, her grasping fingers found the handle. Pushing it down, she all but fell through the door. Kicking it closed behind her, she quickly turned the lock, shutting out the presence.

The room she found herself in was massive. Cold, black stone walls vanished into an inky blackness above her. The ceiling wasn't visible from the floor; instead, it seemed to become a starless night sky. Here and there columns cut from the same rock as the walls soared far above in graceful towers. A colossal fireplace was lit on the far side of the room; a cold fire blazing in the middle, casting light on a carved mantle. A colossal maple table stood in the middle of the room, glistening in the firelight; a pair of cushioned chairs at either end. Those were the sole furnishings of the room.

The mantle drew her attention, and Sylvie drew nearer to it, squinting to make out the details. It was a multi-paneled carving displaying multiple scenes. Sylvie moved to the left one, and was stunned to realize that the carving was of her town! Why would anyone want to make a carving of her town, Sylvie wondered. She filed the question away for later and drew closer. *It's just like a snapshot!* Sylvie marveled, moving closer. The town was just like she remembered, quiet and peaceful and a little run-down. Figures in the street proved to be people walking around, going about their businesses. As Sylvie stared, details jumped out at her; a gang member spray-painting graffiti on the walls near an alley here, there a police officer putting another in his squad car. Sylvie felt her eyebrows shoot straight up; there were two recognizable figures riding their bikes down the street. She brushed her fingers over her face, as if to assure herself that she really was there. *It seemed so long ago, but I'm sure this is the day before Halloween. When Taryn and I were on our way to the costume shop. What is going on here?*

Sylvie moved to the right and gasped. The entire town seemed to be ablaze. Fire reached for the heavens above, carved so realistically that they seemed to dance and writhe on the mantle. Flames poured out of windows and buildings were barely visible through the smoke. The street in the carving

was full of struggling figures; police and gang members warring for supremacy of the city. *The Riot*, Sylvie realized numbly. It had been set to cover up Taryn's mother being kidnapped. Why was the mantle showing her this? She moved on.

The next panel was much more hopeful, and Sylvie relaxed enough to smile. The town bustled, alive once more. Fresh construction was going up everywhere it seemed. Sylvie laughed at the happy throngs of people on the street, waving banners. The largest one was just big enough to read, and proclaimed: WELCOME HOME. Three large figures, seemingly on horses, stood near the front of the crowd, walking down the street. Taryn, Josh and her. She looked hard, but didn't see any sign of Megan or Cindy, although a sliver of the river could be seen. Sylvie fancied she could see them waving in the water.

Smiling, she looked at the last panel of the mantle and froze. She stared uncomprehendingly at the devastation displayed before her. Her town was in ruins, buildings toppled or completely gone. Deep craters pocked the road like acne, and smoke filled the sky. Once again struggling figures filled the street, swirling around massive tracked vehicles—*tanks*, Sylvie recognized. Soldiers sought whatever cover they could, firing up at the clouds or grappling with black, misshapen beasts that Sylvie didn't recognize. They had an eagle's cruel beak, and lions' paws, but the body and tail of a scorpion. Great bat wings sprouted just behind their front legs. *Oh, wait. Mr. Alverson covered these in his Grecian history class. They're...um...um...Chimaeras!* Sylvie thought that they seemed a thousand times worse than the dry descriptions offered by her textbooks. A cluster of creatures, Chimaera and another, a winged bat-monster with taloned hands, caught her eye. They were near one of the buildings, moving outward from a center...Oh, God! Sylvie gripped the mantle tightly as she tried to deny what her eyes were telling her was true; on the street in the center lay Taryn, a huge black spear stuck in her side, her own lying shattered next to her.

Sylvie turned away and screamed! Nightshade peered over his steepled fingers. "Really, Ms. Mathison. Surely we could have done without that."

"You're not real." Sylvie stammered weakly, "You're in prison, rotting in some cell. You can't be here, you just can't."

"That depends on where here is." Nightshade gave one of his dark half-smiles. "You seem to think that you are in the safety of your own room, in your warm bed. You forget...I am not that easily dissuaded."

"No." Sylvie whispered, heart hammering painfully. Her denial sounded pitiful even to her ears.

"Of course." Nightshade smiled cruelly. "I told you when we last saw each other that I was not done with you. I will never be done with you."

"No." Sylvie said a little stronger, she balled her hands into fists. "I'm through with you in my life. I put you in jail!"

"You did." Nightshade's eyebrows reached his hairline. "I seem to recall that it was Taryn, not *you*, who brought me down. Where were you? Ah yes. I believe you were more interested in merely escaping me at first, right?"

Sylvie remembered, she didn't want to, but she did. Nightshade was coming up behind them in his car, Big John in the passenger seat. Her hand grabbing Taryn's as she rushed around the side of the trailer, desperately looking for a way out of there. She remembered Taryn planting her feet and snarling that she was done running from him, that she was going to end it once and for all. Of Taryn and her charge, destroying Nightshade's vehicle, of her being *shot*. Her belly tightened in memory of the bullet that lodged in her stomach. The sensation filled her with white-hot rage.

"No!" Sylvie stood defiantly, glaring back. Summoning her anger, Sylvie used it as a shield against Nightshade. "You are in prison, and this is just a dream. *I* am in control here, and of my life! You're just a shadow!"

Instead of snapping back like she had figured, Nightshade simply arched one brow. "My body is imprisoned." Nightshade agreed amicably. His face split into a serpent's smile. "But you, my dear, are still mine. You will always be mine; for I am always watching you. Seeing you grow and change. It makes me so proud to know how much I changed you. Every time a person looks at you, you know they still see you in my ring, performing those tricks I taught you." He stood suddenly, walking around the table towards her. Sylvie edged backwards, hooves suddenly loud on the floor. She was back to being a centaur. "This is who you are now, Ms. Mathison. Who you always will be. Accept that."

"I will never accept you!" Sylvie roared. She reared, her hooves flashing, but Nightshade was quick; he darted back around the table. Her hooves hit the ground hard enough to jolt her. Nightshade smiled.

“You are correct. I know you will never accept me, but you must accept yourself. If you remember nothing else tonight, remember this: You must accept yourself if you are to save your friend’s life.” With a final smile, Nightshade drifted away, his form blurring. The last things to go were his eyes, shining brightly in the dark.

Sylvie shivered. *Always watching.* That is what he had said. Someone was spying for Nightshade still. But who could it be? Sylvie ran her eyes across the room while she thought through all the possible suspects. They fell onto the final frieze of the carving, and the death of her friend. Suddenly, the last message of Nightshade rang in her mind; *you must accept yourself if you are to save your friend’s life.* She shivered. What did that message mean?

Something big and heavy smashed through the door behind her with no warning, spraying oaken splinters across the room. Sylvie felt one whizz past her cheek. She grunted as another scratched her arm on its journey. Sylvie whirled around, landing on her front hooves with her rifle in her hand. Time seemed to stretch for Sylvie, things moving slowly as if through molasses. She had all day to see the splinter racing towards her. A slight twitch of her head, and she calmly watched it pass through the space her head had occupied. Straightening up, she languidly brought her rifle to bear. She took aim between two glowing yellow eyes in the darkness and fired as time abruptly sped up. The gun bucked and the bullet zipped in between, as if through air. Sylvie felt terror claw at her middle, her gun was good, but she couldn’t shoot *air*.

A cruel chuckle that seemed to echo around her made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “You worry about bitemes when you should worry more about ME!” The voice roared. It sounded like a mac truck, deep and gravelly. “I will destroy it all, everything you know, everything you love. It will all be *mine*.” The mist reached for her.

Sylvie screamed in terror, bolting upright in her bed. The sheet that covered her clung to her frame was drenched from her sweat. Pounding feet outside the garage door was the only warning she had before her father burst through the door, gun in hand. Her mother was right behind him, carrying a massive Desert Eagle that she remembered seeing her with in Rio. Her father moved deeper in the garage towards the door while her mother crossed the space to her bed.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Anna whispered urgently to her, eyes tracking her father’s movements. “What is it?”

Sylvie threw her arms around her and hung tightly as she sobbed. Her mother held her and began rocking back and forth, murmuring soothing words and assurances that it would be all right. Her father finished inspecting the rest of the garage and walked over himself. He crouched easily beside her bed and watched them.

"What's wrong, honey?" Her mother asked her again.

"Oh mom, it was awful!" Sylvie hiccupped. Slowly, and through tears, she told her of the nightmare. She didn't hold any of it back. When she came to the part of Nightshade admitting that he had planted spies, her dad growled and her mother tightened her grip as if afraid they would take her away again. When she finished speaking, she had calmed down enough to dry her eyes and speak normally, although her throat felt tight. Her mother clutched her close.

"It's alright sweet heart. It was just a dream. I'm sure of it." She whispered encouragingly.

"That's right. They're nothing to be afraid of." Her father said gently. "Dreams are a way of the mind processing information. That's all. With all that's happened to you, I'm not surprised that you had a nightmare at all."

Sylvie shook her head. "This one was different." She insisted. "It *felt* real. It was a warning. Something very bad is going to happen, and soon."

Her parents glanced at each other, and Sylvie wanted to scream in frustration. Couldn't they trust her just this once? Then her father spoke up. "Well, at the very least, I suppose we could at least search for this spy you're so concerned about." His face darkened into a frown as he looked at her mother. "It would make perfect sense for a scumbag like Nightshade to have someone watching her. He's going to want her back."

"If that happens, we'll kill him." Her mother said matter-of-factly. "I won't have him harming either of the girls, Greg. Not again." Sylvie could only stare at her mother. She always said that taking a life should *always* be a last resort, but now it sounded like they were hoping to kill him!

Some of what she was thinking must have shown on her face, because her father jumped in. "It's only prudent to do so, honey. This man has shown he is far too capable already." His face reddened in shame. "I was literally dancing to his tune while he was here, the town council constantly reminding me

of how desperately we needed his money.” He sighed regretfully. “I really should have listened to Ben and run him out of town when we had the chance.” He looked at her apologetically. “Sorry, honey.”

Sylvie shook her head. “It’s not your fault, dad. You had no idea what would happen.”

“Maybe, just maybe, I should have.” Her dad said.

“What do you mean?” Sylvie asked, startled. How could he have known what would happen? She watched her dad turn even redder.

“Well, Ben came to me and told me that Nightshade had drug cartel connections. I asked him if he had proof of this, and he said only statistics. Drug deals leaping off the charts when the circus was in town, that sort of thing. I told him that we had given Nightshade an insurance policy and we couldn’t afford to have him pull out. Merely keep an eye on him and the deals out of our town.” He ran his fingers through his greying hair and grimaced. “Ben pulled a guy in for trafficking, belonged to Nightshade. Nightshade said it was a rogue operation, and was able to get the guy off on technicalities and witnesses.” Ben gave a sardonic smirk. “Well, I guess I was playing it too fast and loose. I figured a couple of more days, some more tickets, and I could use the incidents to get rid of Nightshade for good. Then he left, right on cue. I thought that would be the end of it. I was so wrong.”

Sylvie nodded. “Nightshade stationed Big John to watch us.”

“Yep.” Greg agreed. “It wasn’t right for me not to keep on the lookout for any more new people. But I was *hoping* to see new faces. I wanted to believe that the town could get in fresh blood, get a second chance at life. Now...” he trailed off.

Sylvie churned. She was well aware of what her father was saying; she had figured much of it out on her own while a prisoner. Though hearing it come from him in this manner brought up old feelings that she had thought buried. Confusion, fear, and betrayal turned her stomachs into knots. Should she hate him? Forgive him? How could she handle this? She knew what she *wanted* to do, forgive him, but every time she opened her mouth to tell him so the words died in her throat. After opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water, she did the only thing she could. Throwing her arm out she caught him by the wrist to and pulled him in to the hug. Her mother had never let go, and now she had her entire family with her.

Eventually, she had to let go. Her parents after making sure everything was all right and that the garage was locked up tight, good her good night and went back into the house. Once more Sylvie felt jealous that she could not go to her nice warm bed, her room, her *life*! Not for the first time she'd bitterly cursed Roland and his costumes. He might have made Taryn's life much easier now, but he had wrecked hers. And she had no idea how to pick up the pieces.

A small window was her only view out, and in its small frame she could see a dusting of stars in the inky black sky. She spent long hours staring at the sky before sleep finally claimed her.