

After

Ruben signaled to pack up and move on when he finished brushing Wind Racer. In a timely fashion, the group was making their way toward the west again.

The captain rode beside Ruben while the rest of the mercenaries left the big man alone. They were afraid of his temper, and his sword, but they respected him at the same time. He took good care of them as long as they did not mess up.

"Sir, do you want to post a rear guard?"

"No, Captain, not at this time."

The officer was fearful of asking his next question, but felt it needed to be said. "Are you sure that's wise, sir?"

"Are you questioning my decision?" Ruben turned sideways in the saddle. He focused his cold blue eyes on the man riding next to him.

"N...n...no sir! I would never do that," the Captain stammered, a glint of fear showing in his eyes.

"Smart man. I knew there was a reason I made you captain." Ruben faced forward again. "Reinforce to the others that we are making for those ruins you discussed earlier. I want the shelter of walls around me when darkness settles over the land."

"Yes sir!" the Captain answered in a crisp manner. He exhaled a sigh of relief at having not incurred the wrath of the big man as he left. Ruben nodded, satisfied.

The group of mercenaries made good time across the plains. They did not want to be out after dark any more than their leader did. Things of unspeakable evil roamed through the night. Things so large, a man could be carried away easily before anyone could help.

Black sky showed above the orange and red hues of the setting sun when their intended destination came into view. The silhouette of the buildings looked ominous against the darkening horizon. Mutterings of superstitions and bad feelings were heard as the group drew closer.

Ruben stopped Wind Racer some distance from the buildings. He turned to meet his fellow mercenaries. "I understand your misgivings. However, to stay out in the open is to invite nothing but disaster. At least this way we will have a wall to put our backs against if something does arise."

The men and women grumbled about having to go into the ominous site, but they all agreed the idea of staying out in the open was far worse. Inside, there was a measure of protection. Outside, in the open plains, there was none.

"I'll go in first and check out the area. Captain, keep everyone here until I give the signal to follow."

"Shouldn't someone go with you?"

"Not this time. If something is in there, I don't want anyone in my way. Besides, I don't like it when my people get hurt by anything other than me." Ruben grinned as he prodded the black horse toward the even blacker group of buildings.

"Very well, sir. We'll wait for your signal." The captain had genuine respect in his voice.

The people around the officer spoke softly amongst themselves. They had gotten to know the big man as well as he let them. He was cold, cruel, and brutal at times, but he also allowed his fellow companions to see a calmer, more protective side, as well.

The site was not really a town or a city; it was more like a commune. There were four buildings in all. Three of the four were in shambles, their roofs long since gone and their walls partially knocked down. The fourth one, which appeared to be the main building, was for the most part intact. The glass for the long windows was missing and the front door was nowhere in sight, but the roof looked to be in good shape. A tall spire rose upward on the front leading Ruben to believe it was once a church.

He peered up and saw a thick bank of clouds rolling rapidly in their direction. At the same time, he watched a bolt of lightning spread its pointy fingers across the ever-growing mass.

Ruben guided his horse to the fourth building. He dismounted and walked up the steps to the porch. Inside, the room was vast. Several pews stood near one wall. Others were scattered throughout the space, lying on their backs, or remaining upright. The back half of the room was hidden by an impenetrable darkness. A familiar odor hung near the entranceway. He could not remember where he had smelled it before, or what caused it.

Quietly, he withdrew his sword and crept into the dark building. Nothing except for the sound of grit crunching under his boots echoed across the room. He only went as far as the light outside allowed. He did not want to fall or trip in the darkness.

Janet Durbin

A bright flash of lightning glared through the windows. It was enough to show that no animals occupied the building. Fortunately, it also showed that no light came through the roof. The sound of thunder rumbled around the room. Ruben could tell by the time between the flash and the noise that the storm was closing in fast. He backed out and shoved his sword into the sheath before returning to Wind Racer. Throwing himself into the saddle, he rode back to the waiting crowd. The massive, bloated clouds were directly overhead when he reached them.

"The main building is sound and will protect us from the coming rains. Captain, take some men and gather as much wood as you can find. You," Ruben pointed to a female in the crowd, "take the rest inside and start setting up camp. Grab some wood on the way and get a fire started immediately."

The captain and the appointed female nodded their heads. The main body of people moved toward the building while five broke away and followed the officer.

Ruben stayed where he was, watching the people who traveled with him. In his opinion, they were a worthy lot. There was no hesitation when they were told to slaughter the townspeople—all of them. They enjoyed being paid to rape, torture, and kill almost as much as he did. Glancing upward, he followed the group heading toward the main building and hoped the rain would pass quickly.

* * *

Drayco looked at the looming clouds rolling across the darkening sky. He saw the flash of lightning followed by the rumble of thunder. He and Shyanne had followed the mercenaries to the ruins. In the growing twilight, the twins lay flat on their bellies watching from a short distance away as the band of killers split into two groups.

"We have to find shelter before these clouds drop their deluge, or we get struck by lightning."

"The only shelter I see is the building the others are heading toward," Shyanne said as she glanced over a shoulder at the plains beyond. Nothing was visible for as far as the eye could see.

"We can't stay out here. We'll have to find something in the rest of the remains since most of the party looks like it's going to the intact one," Drayco emphasized. "But we'll have to see what that separate group is doing first."

The twins watched the six stragglers run around gathering up any wood they could find from the ruined buildings. Once they felt they had enough, they made their way to the main building.

"Now's our chance." Drayco started over the hill in a hunched over run toward the closest ruin.

"What about Jack? We can't leave him out on the plains," Shyanne whispered as she ran beside her brother.

"If we find shelter we can come back for him. Now keep running before someone comes out and sees us."

Shyanne's forward momentum had slowed with the thought of leaving her horse. It picked up again with Drayco's harsh statement.

They flattened themselves against a portion of upright wall just before a man stepped outside. The mercenary walked past them to check on the horses penned in the ruined building beside the main one. If he had looked around, he would have seen the twins easily. Drayco motioned for them to move around to the other side; the rumbling of thunder masked any sound of their retreat.

The mercenary reached out to the nearest animal. The horse nuzzled his hand and nickered. The others paced around the enclosure, pawing at the ground. Their ears twirled every which a way, as if they were trying to locate a particularly annoying noise located in a direction they could not pinpoint.

"You sure are nervous." He slapped the thick neck affectionately. "It must be the storm. It looks like it's going to be a bad one." The man looked up into the sky and saw a blue white bolt streak across the sky followed immediately by a thunderous roar. Both man and animals jumped.

"Best be getting back in before I get drowned. Be safe." He rubbed the forehead before returning the way he came, missing the twins again.

The smell of rain hung thick in the air, and the wind started whipping everything around. The twins knew they were in for a drenching, but there was no way to avoid it. The rest of the buildings were useless as a shelter.

After

Drayco made his way to the horses. The Bay, Bravaro, was near the back. He came to the dark man when he clucked softly. "I see they've been taking good care of you, boy. I'll come back and get you when we free the others, okay?"

Bravaro nudged him in the chest and snorted. It was as if he gave Drayco the okay to go on without him. He hugged the horse's neck then turned toward Shyanne. "I have a plan. Get Jack and bring him here. We'll put him in with the other horses. No one will be the wiser."

Do you think that's a good idea?"

"What better place to hide him and keep him safe at the same time," he answered.

Shyanne shrugged her shoulders, turned around, and ran over the hill to get her horse. A few minutes later, she returned pulling him behind her. She put him in with the other horses, but secured his reins close to the entrance so that he would be easy to find if the time came for a quick exit. Drayco brought Bravaro next to Jack and secured him. The horse had a bridle in place, but no saddle. The dark man knew that would not be a problem.

After they were finished, Drayco said, "We need to get as close as possible. I want to see if there is any way to get inside and free Joseph and Drizzle. If there is, I want you to stay outside and cover our retreat."

"Drayco, I want to go in. I can be of more help there. I can handle my sword better than most men."

"I know, Shyanne. That's why I want you there to cover our backs once we're outside running. Joseph will be weak, and who knows how Drizzle will do. He's been tied up for several days now."

Shyanne's shoulders dropped. She did not look very happy. Finally, she said, "I understand. I'll be there for you," and trotted toward the main building.

Drayco sighed and took off after her. They had gone only a couple of paces when the clouds decided to dump their precious cargo, hitting them with a torrential downpour. They were soaked in seconds.

Suddenly, Drayco was grabbed by the front of his shirt and pulled behind a section of half crumbled wall. Shyanne put a finger to her lips when he started to protest. She pointed to the front porch. He glanced at it and watched as a man and a woman walked out of the building.

"Come on, Lela, why can't we disappear someplace away from the others? The rhythm of the rain reminds me of how badly I want ya."

The man pressed himself against the woman's back and wrapped his arms around her, grabbing her breasts. Lela flung his arms off and spun around in one fluid motion, a dagger in her hand as she faced him. She grabbed a fistful of shirt to prevent him from backing away. The tip of the blade was so close to his skin, blood flowed from the nick it caused. The trickle ran down his neck.

"I told you before, you stench of a rizbak, I'm not interested. If I were, you'd know it already. Now leave me alone—or you may not wake up one morning."

"Aww, Lela, ya don't have to be like that...mak'n me bleed and all." The man wiped the blood running down his throat with his fingers. "Give me a kiss to show you're sorry." He grabbed the arm holding his shirt and received another slice across the top of his forearm.

"Why'd ya have to do that? All I wanted was to have a bit o fun with ya." He shrugged her hold off, causing blood to splatter across her shirt, and stormed back inside, nursing his bleeding parts.

Lela put her dagger away and went in after him. "I warned you before. This is what you..." The rain covered the rest of the statement as they disappeared inside.

The twins grinned broadly at each other. Shyanne gestured toward her neck, pretending to slice it as she stuck her tongue off to the side. Drayco shook his head at her warped humor and twirled his finger close to his temple, indicating she was nuts. She nodded her head in agreement.

The smile disappeared as he motioned that they needed to move closer to the building. They ran up to one of the long windows and hugged the wall on either side. Drayco leaned forward slightly and peered inside the room.

A small crackling fire burned in a dirt pit near the back wall. Men and women relaxed about the room: some sleeping, others carrying on conversations. A few of the surviving benches were being used as beds. The rest became firewood. Holes were visible here and there in the ceiling; none leaked rainwater. The foul odor noticed earlier still hung in the air. The smell of the burning wood

Janet Durbin

masked it for the most part.

Ruben leaned against a wall a short distance from the rest with one foot propped up. Joseph and Drizzle lay close to him, their restraints still in use to prevent any escape.

Drizzle was upset. He kept looking up at the ceiling, ears raised then flattened alternately. The big man watched the cat with interest. The rest of the group ignored them. They were thinking about other things, like their families or the local bars that were waiting for them.

"Has Drizzle become the nervous type?" Drayco asked.

"No. He the most rock steady creature I've ever met."

"Well, something sure has him jumpy. I don't ever remember seeing him this edgy before."

Shyanne looked inside toward the big cat. "You're right, something sure has him uptight. I wonder..."

A strange noise started coming from the area near the entrance of the building, a sort of rustling sound. The mercenaries missed it, at first. Finally, one of the men close to the front heard it. He walked over and looked around, attempting to locate the source of the sound. It seemed to be coming from overhead, in the ceiling.

"What's that?" he asked, trying to see into the dark holes above.

Ruben straightened up. He was looking at Drizzle, not the man speaking. The cat was going wild, struggling against his bonds with all his might. His mouth was tied shut, leaving him unable to bite at the restraints holding him. He yowled in frustration. Joseph watched the struggling cat, as well.

The rustling sound grew louder, as if many, many things were brushing against each other. Men and women around the room stopped what they were doing to look first at the cat, then at the man near the front.

A bad feeling settled in the pit of Ruben's stomach. The odor had reminded him of something from the past. Unfortunately, he still could not put a finger on what it was.

The man standing under the holes shouted, "Someone bring a light over here. I want to see what's up there." He had his arm extended toward the fire.

Drayco glanced at his sister. He could tell from the look on her face that she was uneasy. He understood; he was wearing the same look. He turned his attention back to what was happening inside just as someone was getting up with a torch. It was the same woman who had argued on the porch earlier. The blood still dotted her clothes.

Lela made it to the reaching man's side when Ruben remembered what caused the disturbing smell.

"No! Wait! Get away from there. NOW!" He started to move toward the pair. It was too late.