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My Coronation

 From the construction site, I move on to the remnants of an old military surplus store, barely standing amidst the rubble of what used to be a three-sided shopping plaza, with a police station right across the street. Behind it is another residential plat, situated down a ridge and separated by a small runoff river. The front half of the store is buried under a collapsed portion of the roof, blocking the back from all but the most adventurous climbers. I make my way over carefully using both hands and both feet at all times – I’d hate to end my saga by slipping and impaling myself on one of the accusatory fingers of rebar pointing up at me.

 The back half of the store is still in relatively good condition. Even if the sign out front hadn’t been mostly intact, I could still tell what sort of place this was. Every shelf is painted with a camo configuration, and the parts where repairs have been necessary are all fixed with camo-colored duct tape. Unsurprisingly, anything repaired with this duct tape has survived the collapse of the store in the midst of the mutant-cannibal apocalypse. The place is still a mess – it looks like some pipes burst somehow and caused a mini-flood inside the store, which has long-since dried up and left the entire place covered in mold and mildew.

 Somewhere further in the back, I hear a commotion, like something dropping or being tossed. I immediately crouch and reach for my short sword. I don’t like the confines of this place since my katana won’t be as effective in here. Cautiously, I make my way toward the rear of the store, where an open half-door leads to dark stockroom, lit only by holes in the roof and the open door leading out back. With my short sword in one hand and my flashlight in the other, I creep up to the doorway and try to peer inside without shining any light. I hear something moving around in there, apparently going through whatever is back there, but it’s too dark for me to see clearly. I can barely make out movement in the far right corner, just out of sight. For a second longer, I listen, but whatever is back there doesn’t make a sound. Then, the movement stops for a moment and I hear breathing, like something or someone trying to catch their breath.

 It snorts and snarls, almost like a moan, and it sounds an awful lot like a mutant. As far as I can tell, there is only one of them. I look back at the store I just came from, knowing that I should get out of there, but I’m not confident enough that I can climb that pile of rubble fast enough or safely enough to escape in time. I decide to try to scare or intimidate whoever or whatever is inside the room, and maybe collect some useful items if I can succeed in frightening them off. Plus, if there are mutants in this area, I need to know to determine whether or not I should move on and take my charge with me.

 I turn and step into the room, swinging around with my flashlight and my short sword pointed together. This room is wider than the cramped confines of the store, but until I am sure I’m secure, my short sword stays in my hand. Right away, I spot the source of the noise – a slender female mutant. She’s one of the unusually skinny ones, no clothes, covered in black-brown mud. She is crouched in one of the corners, and until I pointed my light at her, she appeared to be focused intensely on something, exerting herself strenuously. I believe I’ve stumbled upon her as she was answering nature’s call, but something is off. I smell a very distinct smell, like hot blood, and she is moving much more slowly that I had projected...

 …and that’s when I see it. I see the shiny, rounded lump squirming beneath her. She’s not quite sitting directly on top of it, but it’s clear what I’ve stumbled upon: mother and child. I can’t help but stand there and stare at them, astonished. She stares back at me, her diaphragm heaving with labored, exhausted breaths, and she pushes herself back against the wall, reaching forward and pulling her freshly born infant close. She holds it protectively, possessively, which makes me even more nervous that she’ll lash out and come after me. I back up toward the opposite wall, shining my light around the room to make sure we’re alone in here. I shine my light back on her and she flinches, snarling at me angrily, turning her body so that her newborn is almost completely hidden from sight. With a force of will that is actually quite impressive, she heaves herself to her feet, the fresh blood dripping from her body and legs, her eyes focused on me the entire time. Is it her blood or something else’s blood? As she moves along the wall, it’s clear that the blood is coming from her. At first, I think she’s injured, but when I see where the blood is coming from on her, it becomes pretty obvious to me that she just finished expelling the new mutant life from her body. She strokes it a few times, and I hear a sharp squeal from it, followed by a revolting sucking noise. It just began to breathe.

I just stand there, amazed. She takes two or three tentative steps along the wall, her glare switching between me, her infant, and the back door. If I’m going to make a move, I have to do it now, but after some pondering I decide to just let her leave with her baby mutant cannibal, assuming she doesn’t try to come back and make me into the first meal for her cute, cuddly, slimy, horrid neonatal. I don’t think I could, in good conscience, kill her and leave the new life to die without her care (and Lord knows I’d never kill the baby mutant myself – I don’t think I could ever bring myself to kill a baby anything unless it was actively attacking me). Within moments, she clambers out the door and disappears down the hill into the residential area out back, taking her sucking, squealing, monster-baby with her.

 I stand there for a little bit longer, trying to process what I’ve just witnessed. I’ve always wondered, in a part of my mind that is reserved for questions I’m prepared to never have the answers to, how the mutants reproduced so quickly. From what I remember in the days close to when this all began, people were reporting that the mutants were multiplying in various ways, one of which was some process by which they turned regular humans into flesh-eating monsters like them. It also appears now that somehow, they initiate a process of natural birth, although I didn’t get a close enough look at the infant to be able to tell what kind of newborns that process produces. At first glance, it reminded me of a massive larva, but with a distinct shape. I definitely saw some form of a head, and the sucking breaths indicate some form of airway and respiratory system upon birth, but anything else is left to my imagination, which I think I’m better off leaving alone.

 I find the courage and the stomach to search the rest of the stockroom, first checking the spot where I found the female mutant mother. Lots of blood and other body fluids, like a usual mammalian birth, and nothing else unusual that gives me any clues about the specific mutant reproductive process. The rest of the room is covered with boxes of old stuff, some of it useful and some of it junk. I find some nicely cleaned stainless steel mess kits, each complete with a pan featuring a collapsible handle, a lid that doubles as a second plate with a divider in the middle, and a full set of utensils. I take one complete kit and scavenge an extra set of utensils from a second kit, fitting the compact case easily into my backpack. This will make cooking and preparing food a whole lot easier, especially for two people.

 Over on a shelf just high enough to be almost out of sight, I find the holy grail of survival: a box of filtered water bottles! But these aren’t just any water bottles – these are some seriously advanced filtration systems. According to the specs included in the packaging, each one of these is good for over six thousand liters of drinking water. Just put the water into the bottle, replace the screw-tight lid-pump on the bottom, give it a few pumps, and enjoy sterile drinking water. These things refuse to operate once the limit is reached, and a tiny plastic page attached to each bottle with a string shows how to eject the spend filter cartridge and replace it with a new one. I’ve found *an entire box* full of these bottles and filters! I’m definitely not shy about taking several of them. I grab two bottles and five spare filter cartridges, which I know means I’ll probably have to get rid of something else, but this will be more than worth it. Also, buried under the bottles, I find one of those filtration straws, which will enable us to drink directly from water sources we find as we travel. Needless to say, that goes into the backpack next to the spare filters.

 With two people to travel and gather resources, I know we’ll need a second backpack, or some other way to carry supplies. I spend fifteen minutes going through the rest of the boxes to find one, tossing otherwise useful things into a pile in the center of the room, like lighters, old hats, sunglasses, etc. Anything exceptional has almost certainly been picked out and claimed by others, except for those water bottles. I don’t find anything else of note in the stockroom, so I go back into the standing half of the main store to make sure I don’t leave anything behind. On my way out, I spy a few torn up pieces of cloth and I dig around in them, finding a timeworn, modest-sized, leather, haversack shoulder bag with leather straps and metal buckles. It also has additional straps to wear it over both shoulders and several inside pockets and dividers, all of which appear to have been a custom but durable addition after its initial manufacturing. It may not be military-grade gear, but after inspecting it to make sure it’s functional, I roll it up and stuff it into my backpack before heading out the back door.

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 The walk back to the house takes fifteen minutes, but it feels like an hour as I constantly look around and keep checking my six o’clock, nervous about seeing the ghastly humanoid shape racing toward me in that startling, four-limbed gallop. Fortunately, I make it back to the house with about an hour and a half of sunlight left. The first thing I do when I return is lock the front door, for all the good that will do, and then turn to greet my guest. At first, I don’t see her on the mattress in the living room, which makes my heart skip a beat, but then she comes from the side, from the kitchen to the left.

 “Who’s there?” I hear her call. She enters only enough for me to see my pistol held firmly in both of her hands, pointed directly at my face. I can see the atrophied muscles in her arms straining to control the weapon, but she’s perfectly level and absolutely steady.

 “It’s me, it’s me,” I reply, holding up both my hands. “Remember, I said I’d be back.”

 She steps into the room, still dressed in her underwear, and lowers the gun, trudging back over to the mattress. “Why didn’t you let me know?”

 “What, announce myself?”

 She looks at me like it’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever said as she plops down on the mattress and covers herself back up. “I might’ve shot you.”

 “What if you had been a mutant?”

 “What if **you** had been a mutant?”

 I sigh. “Sorry,” I say defensively. I hadn’t thought of that – this arrangement is going to take a lot of getting used to, which could last for a while.

 She looks at the fire, where more of the meat strips are sizzling on the hot rocks, then slides my pistol across the floor to me.

 “You can have this back now,” she says. I pick it up and stick it in my back pocket before coming and kneeling down in front of the fire beside her.

 “Have you eaten?” I ask.

She nods without making eye contact. “Some meat…some water…”

 “And…?”

 She shrugs, her bony shoulders clearly thin beneath the blanket she’s using to hide her slight frame. “I’m getting there.”

 “You didn’t throw up or have a bad reaction?”

 She shakes her head delicately, then gives a corner-mouth smile as she runs a hand through her stringy hair. “It was really good,” she tells me quietly.

 I nod, pleased to hear it. “Good…good…glad you’re getting better.”

 I reach into my backpack and start pulling out everything I picked up for her today.

 “Oh, and…here. I got you some stuff…”

 She watches me pull out the clothes, the haversack, the mess kits, and the water bottles. From what I can tell, she’s very eager to get her hands on them, so as I pull them out, I toss or slide them across the floor to her. She looks at the haversack inside and out, immediately finding a place to store the mess kit and the water bottle. The clothes she scrutinizes a bit more intensely, giving me a raised eyebrow that tells me she would have chosen a little differently.

 “When was the last time you went shopping with a woman?” she asks disdainfully.

 I shrug. “Probably back when I was five and my mom took me to the store to buy groceries.”

 She cocks her head at me incredulously. “I mean with a girlfriend or something.”

 I shrug again. “Never had one.”

 She seems confused. She looks at me like I just spoke a different language.

 “Êtes-vous sérieux?” she mumbles to herself, staring at me. When my expression makes it clear I don’t understand French, she seems to start to think through her words.

 “Girlfriend,” she says more slowly. “Am I saying that correctly?”

 I nod. “Yup.”

 “So, in your life, your whole life, from when you were born to right now--”

 “Never had one,” I repeat a bit more tersely. Why is this such a difficult concept for others to understand even after an apocalypse has simplified the world? Although, it isn’t like I’ve ever advertised it. My tone must have been more unreasonable than I meant, because she shrinks back a little.

 “Okay, then, sorry…” she says quietly. “I guess I…oh, what’s the phrase…? Hit a nerve, is that it?”

 I’m tired of this conversation already, but I guess it wouldn’t be right to not reply. “Yeah, that’s right,” I tell her, trying to affirm her suspicion and her use of English at the same time. “I guess you could say I don’t connect with others very easily.”

 “Mmmm,” she intones confidently through a smile. “Hard to imagine.”

 Her sarcasm makes me chuckle, which makes her smile.

 “Sorry,” I tell her, a little less defensively than the last time I said it.

 She pauses, looking at the clothes on the floor in front of her. “My parents always told me I was too insensitive.”

 I laugh. If only she knew how many times I’d heard the same thing from people who knew me. I suddenly wonder what sort of situation would drive a girl like her to suicide by starvation – what caused such apathy in someone with so many opinions about life? I guess all of us have our own sensitive spots.

 “You should go try those on – see if anything fits,” I tell her. She looks at the clothes, picks them up, and stands. The blanket wrapped around her makes it look like she is wearing a royal garment, which goes well with her pale face and the way she carries her chin and shoulders, even as weak as she is. If she wasn’t so thin or her hair so stringy, she’d be a picture of a French monarch. She looks like she’s about to say something to me, then adopts a questioning frown.

 “I was going to thank you for the clothes, but I don’t even know your name,” she says with realization.

 I sigh, realizing that the moment I give her my name, all pretenses are past – we’ll be stuck together in this wasteland until one of us dies. I knew this point was coming, but I didn’t think it would be so soon. I figured I’d get maybe another day to myself before I had to adopt someone else into my scavenging family. Then again, maybe I didn’t, or maybe I didn’t care at all until she asked.

 “I’m Matt,” I reply, reaching out with my hand. “Matt King.”

 She takes my hand and a wry grin escapes.

 “Ooh, la-la, Mister *King*,” she blurts out sarcastically, doing a fake half-curtsey with her blanket before turning and heading toward the kitchen to change. I sit there for a second in disbelief, staring at her as she goes.

 “Oh, now, okay, don’t even think about it, Marie Antoinette,” I declare, standing.

 She stops and turns, giving me a knowing smile. “I’m tempted to just let you call me that from now on.”

 “Why?” I ask. “How is that better? You know who she was, right?”

 She hesitates, and for a moment I see genuine sadness in her eyes.

 “My name is Ines, Ines Blanchett,” she tells me with resignation.

 I squint at her. “Well…that’s not so bad.”

 She grins. “I know. I changed it just now. ‘Ines’ means chaste and holy, and Blanchett means ‘white’.”

 “And are you both of those things?” I ask directly, crossing my arms.

 She ponders my question for a moment, then nods, giving me a mischievous look and another fake curtsey before disappearing into the other room.

 “I am from now on, *Your* *Majesty*.”

 I wait until she is out of sight, then I let myself laugh as quietly as I can.