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Don’t Look Back

 There’s something profoundly unique about going to sleep in a place where another living, breathing human being also resides.  If you’re used to someone else being there, it enables you to relax, to breathe easy in the knowledge that you exist as a part of a whole.  You are comforted by the fact that they are simply there.  When you’re apart, you’re reminded of it by the sense of their absence, and you give at least some thought to what they’re experiencing at that moment, in a strange place that has little or nothing to do with you or where you live.

 But if you’re used to being alone, or you’ve gotten used to the other person’s company only during the day, then their presence is an invasion of your life and privacy.  You get into bed with an intrusive nudge on the inside of your head just above your eyes, regardless of how calm or safe you feel, even if you’ve invited the person or persons to stay with you, because someone is in your living space that doesn’t completely belong there.  The only thing that makes any of this better is if both of you are someplace unfamiliar, away from home, away from the room and the bed you call yours.  But then, in that case, neither of you are perfectly comfortable anyway.

 It’s only on the fourth night sleeping in the same location as the girl, now known to me as Ines once I stop mentally referring to her as ‘the girl’, that I start to notice the comfort I’m now deriving from her presence.  At first, I suspect that it is there because she and I have begun to connect on a more meaningful level since she started regaining strength and speaking more regularly that day, but as I drift off with the embers of the fireplace smoldering and sizzling, lulling us to sleep even as they fade themselves, for a moment I realize how utterly different is has been these past few nights.  I want to say I haven’t slept this well since before the world fell apart, but I can’t even remember what that was like anymore.  Maybe it was a lot like this.  It’s too bad that it’s been so long that even this symbiotic sense doesn’t feel at all familiar.

 I’m sure this all used to be explained by science somehow, but I don’t really care.

 She found a set of clothes that fits her out of the stuff I brought back, a pair of cargo pants, a t-shirt, and a long-sleeve, plaid over shirt (I was hoping that last one would fit – it’ll help in the colder days ahead, and the dark black and red colors are good for keeping concealed).  She wasn’t as exhausted after trying everything on like I thought she would be – she’s stronger than I thought she was.  That’s a good sign, both because it means we’ll be able to move on together soon and also because it demonstrates that she’s resilient in an impressive way.  She hasn’t fully recovered from the effects of her starvation by any stretch of the imagination, but she’s made significant progress in these past four days, more than I ever expected.

 I spend the morning packing up everything to make sure I can fit it into my backpack, and sure enough, there are some things that don’t make it in.  The filtration straw, the packet of jerky, the rope, and the extension cord all are left out.  Even without all that, my backpack is so full that I can barely get the zippers closed.  I take out the two books, *The Art of War* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and only then am I able to securely close all the zippers.

 Ines, who has been sitting here, watching me pack up while she continued to make strips of jerky from the venison chunks (another thing that I’m not able to pack), picks up the books, examining them.  Her eyebrows go up.

 “Hmmm,” she hums.  “A man of many tastes, I see.”

 I snort.  “*Grey* is for kindling.”

 She shrugs.  “Eh, who am I to judge?”

 “The other one is more useful,” I add.  She hefts *Art of War*, feeling the lightness of it compared to the other, heavier book.

 “It’s not very big,” she observes.  I hold out my hand and she gives it back to me.

 “Its ideas are,” I tell her.  “And I study it, just in case I need to know them.”

 “Going to war anytime soon?”

 Now it’s my turn to shrug.  “Kinda live in one, don’t we?”

 She shifts her weight and looks at me with an expression I can’t place.

 “What?” I ask.

 “Nothing,” she tells me with an intonation that lets me know she really doesn’t mean it.  “But I was sure you were one of those usual American Facebook boys.  You sound older than you look.”

 I shake my head.  “I have a baby face.  And I hated Facebook.”

 “I did too,” she confesses casually, picking up her bag and testing it out.  I notice that she’s put all the things that haven’t fit into my backpack into it, and I’m pleased to see her bearing the weight without much apparent effort.

 “When I first moved to America, I tried to get on it - I loved it in France - but I tried it too soon.”

 “What do you mean?”

 “I wasn’t used to, uh...American social customs...I had a bad time of it, and then everyone else wanted to know why I didn’t get on Facebook all the time.  It was annoying.”

 The way she said that last word sounded cute and funny.  I try and fail to hide a smile.  She doesn’t let me get away with it.

 “What?  What did I say?”

 “Nothing,” I tell her, not any more truthful than when she said the same word just a moment ago.

 “What was it?” she presses me with confident conviction, standing up straight and putting her hands on her bony hips.  “I said ‘it was annoying’ and you were about to make fun of me.”

 “I would never--” I attempt to say without laughing.

 “It’s the word ‘annoying’ right?”

 I can’t help but nod and try not to smile any more than I already am.  She shakes her head.

 “I’ve always had trouble with that one,” she says exasperatedly.  “That one and ‘mayonnaise’.”

 I put up a meager, insufficient defense.  “No, it sounds cute when you say it…”

 Ines will have none of it.  “And it sounds incredibly masculine and severe when you say *‘scavenge’*,” she says to me with a smirking look of ‘gotcha’.  “So ha, there you are.  You sound just as funny to me as I do to you.”

 “Except you’re not laughing,” I point out as I go through my backpack again.

 “Because I’m better than you,” she decides, crossing her arms and turning up her nose at me.  “I am chaste and holy and white.  Ines Blanchett.”

 I pick up the filtration straw and throw it at her.  To my surprise, she catches it.

 “Nice catch, Blanch,” I drawl.  “Now see what else you can help me carry from this stuff so we can get out of here.”

 Ines comes over to where I’m kneeling down and squats next to me, resting her elbow on my shoulder.

 “And where are we going, Your Majesty?” she asks with a smile, her voice dripping with patronage.

 I look up at her.  Her brown eyes are filled with a depth that belies her thin face - even her thin lips are smiling in a way that doesn’t seem possible given her recent condition.

 “You’re clearly recovered from starvation,” I note, handing her the salt containers, the three bottles of water I have left, and the hydrogen peroxide.

 “Mostly,” she admits proudly, setting them in her bag.  The added weight doesn’t seem to bother her, and if it does, she doesn’t let it show.

 “We need to find you a second change of clothes,” I say in answer to her question.  “And we need to see how far you can walk, plus it’s always good to keep on moving and *scavenging*.”  I pronounce that last word with a French accent or at least as close to one as I can muster.

 She giggles.  “Are you sure I’m up for such a challenge?”  I smile again.  Her accent really came through on the last word, too.

 “If not, you better man up, Miss Holy White,” I tell her, standing up.  I reach into my trench coat and take out one of my two spring-assisted pocket knives and one of my lighters.

 “Here, these should help with that.”

 She looks disappointed, though I can’t tell if it’s genuine or not.  “What, you don’t trust me with a gun?”

 I raise an eyebrow and hold out the two instruments.  She accepts them with a wordless grin, then turns and heads for the front door.

 “What are we waiting for, King Manly?  Aren’t you eager to go sort through women’s clothes?”

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 Ines expresses significant reservations about going back into the house where I found her, so we search two adjacent houses for some clothes for her instead.  The first of those is in such bad shape that we fear entering, seeing that the structure may collapse at any moment.  The second one yields more promising results.  There’s some water in the basement where some pipes have burst, so we fill our filtered water bottles up as full as they will go.  Ines also finds an extra change of clothes, including underwear that she says fits her more appropriately than the things I brought her.  I choose to take her word for it. The house is structured similarly to the others in the area, with a basement and an upstairs positioned just like they are in our current residence.  The whole search takes less than twenty minutes.

 After we clear the interior of the structure, I leave Ines alone in an upper room so that she can try on as many clothes as she likes before finding ones that suit her.  I encourage her to pick the most comfortable clothes she can find since they will likely be the only other ones she’ll have for a long time to come.  She expresses concern over my smell, which she deduces comes from the fact that I’ve only carried and used two sets of clothes since I set out on my adventure, but the allegation isn’t at all relevant to the situation as far as I’m concerned, so I ignore her and return downstairs.

 I hear her walking around upstairs, the ceiling creaking with her activity, and I casually meander around the first floor. It’s a bit dim because one of the back windows has been boarded up, so I make do with what I can make out without the light. The living room has a place where a big-screen TV used to sit, but the entertainment center has been smashed. Pieces of DVDs lay on the floor like broken glass, and splintered wood that has been rotting for a few seasons gives off a forest floor smell. The back door is long gone, and the weather has intruded into the house and caused the carpet to become blotched and stained over time, almost like nature is taking over and the floor is assimilating with its own version of camouflage.

 The kitchen chandelier fan has extended down from the ceiling by its cords like an elevator and is now sitting on top of the table, which is sturdy and still intact, right down to its laminated, old-timey placemats. The cabinet doors are either missing, hanging on by a hinge, or lying broken on the floor, and all the cabinets are empty. There’s still a refrigerator in here, sitting partly open with the look of a broken jaw, filled with the gooey remains of food so far gone that ‘spoiled’ would be a much too generous a term to describe them – ‘science experiment’ is much more suited for what they’ve become. The stench from it hangs in the back of my throat and I grimace, realizing that this must be the odor Ines caught before – maybe if I brought her down here and plastered some of this toxic waste all over her face, she’d realize there are worse things to smell out here than me.

 From gazing at the slimy remnants of nutritious sustenance, I notice a strange shape and color out of the corner of my eye. The kitchen window sits right above the sink and all the glass has been broken, leaving only sharp ends around the edges and a clear view of the outside. There’s a deck and a pool in the backyard, but I see movement, something poking up within the pool just out of sight. I freeze and stare, watching it as it descends off to the left, then comes back up. It’s brown and looks like a branch, but I can’t tell exactly from here. Once more, it goes down, then comes up. Is that a deer antler? Is there a deer eating or drinking in the pool? More meat…I start to salivate. Cautiously, I pull out my bow and slide an arrow into place, then go barbed-tip-first out the back doorway.

The old wooden deck is right outside, and I walk carefully so as not to make any noise that might alert my potential prey (or enemy). I hear Ines make some sort of sarcastic-sounding comment in French from upstairs and I silently call her a name, mentally telling her to shut up, then wishing I had the opportunity to go back up and tell her for real. The backyard is contained by the remains of an old metal fence, the white bars ending in arrow-like tips at the top. Most of the white has turned brown with rust, and many of the vertical bars are missing, providing ample space for living things to enter and exit at their leisure. I pick one such opening off to the right, which leads back around to an area where I’ve already been today, and choose that as my exit plan should I need to use it.

My booted feet touch the concrete surface surrounding the pool’s edge, and the closer I get, the more clear it is to me that the pool is almost entirely drained, only filled at the deep end with a few feet of collected rain water. I draw the bow back and point it at the moving thing as it fully comes into view, sticking up from within the unnatural pond. At first, I squint from behind my bow – I can’t really tell what it is. It’s like a scarecrow of sorts, but its very round and looks to be a package of something hanging from a carved branch sticking up from the water. Squatting down by the side of the pool, it’s clear to me that it’s made out of some sort of leather, and that it is stuffed with a whole lot of whatever’s inside.

“What the heck…?” I mumble.

The curious scavenger in me spends a minute arguing with the paranoid survivalist sharing the same body, but either way, it’s prudent to know what is in that bag if at all possible. The right side of the pool is what used to be the shallow end, sloping down to the deeper part, so I hop down into that, putting away my bow and pulling out my short sword instead. The moment my feet touch the bottom, I get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, and the foreboding sense that I’m being watched. I take one step, and then my eyes dart from one opening in the fence to the next, to the next, and on until I’ve looked at every possible attack avenue. I take another step and do the same thing, also making sure that I’m looking at every inch of the pool floor surrounding me. Then, my eyes settle on the package sticking up in front of me, and the murky, brown water surrounding it. I’m about halfway down the slope and I can see into the leathery sack, which is now clearly not a single piece, but multiple pieces sewn together.

A breeze blows through the trees and bushes around me and makes the sack move again, but it also sends a shiver up my spine. This thing looks familiar somehow, but I can’t quite place it…

…until another breeze tips the package just a little too far. The rebound causes the stick to snap and the leather sack falls towards me. I stumble back, almost falling over, my sword held out in front of me, angled toward the sack. When it hits the ground, it falls apart.

I feel like I’ve been punched in the chest. The contents of the package spill out, soaked with rain and red – a pile of several dozen human hands and feet, plus or minus a few digits. There is also a skull on the back of the contraption to which the sack was attached – the sack, which is made of “leather” harvested from humans. This is a storage device for this grisly collection.

That’s when it hits me – this was left here on purpose, and it wasn’t left for me.

I hear motion in the trees, which surround the fenced-in pool area, all overgrown to the point where seeing anything in them is virtually impossible. At first, I think it might be the breeze, but I can’t convince myself that the movement of the branches is rhythmic enough to be caused by wind blowing. In my adrenaline rush, I focus on a spot, thinking I see a face, but the shape among the branches vanishes as quickly as it appeared. I turn and jump back up to climb out of the pool, but as I do, I see something moving on top of the house to my right. I stand up straight, peering at the roof where I saw it, but it’s gone. Then, in the backyard of that same house, I see another crude construction. It’s one of their territory markers.

They’re in the neighborhood.

A noise behind me, across the pool, spins me around. Her face is only there for a split second, but I lock eyes with her before she pulls back into the bushes. She’s watching me in between the fence rungs, her gleaming eyes peering out from a dirty, mud-covered face. Her mouth is hanging open, and she makes a noise in between a huff and a grunt. Then, she’s gone.

I run back to the house, leaping up the stairs to the deck in a single bound. I’m inside in less than three seconds, but it seems like years pass before then. I round the corner, sheathing my sword, reminding myself to breathe. I’m about to call out for Ines as loudly as I dare, but she is at the bottom of the stairs just as I approach.

“Well, Your Highn--”

“They’re here,” I say, not realizing how out of breath I am. She looks at me, her expression changing. I can’t imagine how unsettled I look right now, but by her face it must be pretty bad. She has her bag across her shoulder, and I don’t even wait for a response. I grab her arm and pull her toward the front door. I lean against it, thankful that it’s open and that I can see out of it clearly. The coast appears clear, but I’m worried about what might be waiting out of sight on the left or right – or maybe above or below.

Ines is pressed up against me, her hands on my arm and shoulders. I can feel her rapid heartbeat even through my coat, even with my own heart thundering in my ears. She wants to ask something, but she doesn’t know what it is or how to say it.

“Just follow me,” I tell her. “And don’t look back.”

She nods, swallowing. I stick my head out the door and look to both sides quickly, which is when I realize something that makes this entire situation nearly unbearable – we don’t have much daylight left. The nearest building in sight that I suspect might be reasonably secure is the abandoned, boarded-up police station about a block and a half down and across the street. I point it out to her and she nods again.

“Don’t stop till you get there,” I whisper.

“No…no stopping,” she breathes.

I put a hand on her back, partly to try to comfort her, partly to comfort myself. “We got this,” I try. She doesn’t seem convinced, and neither do I.

“On three…”

She tenses up beside me, but lets go of my arm and crouches into position.

“One…two…*three!”*

We’re off. The world passes by in a blur, and I’m halfway down the street before my mind can even register that I’ve started. All I can think about is the breath on my neck of the being than plans on eating me for dinner. The sense of being hit by a freight train comes back to me from that one basement brawl, and I expect with every certainty to feel that same train come crashing down on my back and shoulders. I just hope that if it does, it’ll be over quickly, but a few seconds pass and I’m still moving. Now I’m the freight train, and I plan on barreling right into the safety of the station, letting nothing stand in my way. Almost there…just a few more wide bounds from my soaring legs, and we’ll be home free.

I hear my name called from somewhere behind me and I realize that it’s Ines’s voice. My head turns briefly and I see her, several bounds behind me, slowing, out of breath. She’s too weak to keep up.

I stop, my boots sliding on the gravel-strewn roadside, torn between two necessary things. Ines makes it within a few feet of me, but stops, her face twisted as she struggles to breathe, fighting her body’s own feebleness. Her face is ashen and she looks like she’s about to pass out.

“We can’t stop,” I insist, closing the distance between us, looking back the way we came. Ines can’t respond, but she holds out her hand, groping for something to hold onto. I catch her as she collapses and I think her bag must weight almost as much as she does. I look back – the police station is so close!

“Few more steps…” I say to her, trying to grab her under the arms to support her and urge her along. She’s gasping for air and looks dizzy, her eyes wanting to roll back into her head. She’s desperately trying not to faint.

Glancing back, I do a double-take when I see the house we just left almost a block away. Four shapes are crouched atop it, watching us. A fifth shape stands in the middle of their group – he’s enormous, the biggest I’ve ever seen, even from this distance. He leans back and utters a guttural, piercing shriek, the noise I hear whenever a group of them moves into new territory.

I grab Ines by the arms and drag her toward the police station. We approach, but the tall, barbed-wire-topped gate is locked with a padlock. No time for subtlety, I decide, as I shift my arm around Ines’s slight frame and use my other to whip out my sidearm, blowing the padlock to bits with a single loud shot. I kick open the gate and pull Ines inside, then lay her down and grab the tire iron from my backpack carbineer, shoving it into the gate and twisting it among the wire links to keep it shut, at least for now.

The door to the police station is slightly open, but there’s something blocking it from the other side. I reach to my backpack and pull the short survival axe from its carbineer, and with it I hack loose the boards against the nearest window. My shoulders and feet do the rest, and I jump inside, my flashlight and sword at the ready. I don’t see anything inside except for dark hallways and organized surroundings, like the inside of this station was never touched by the chaos of the outside world. The only thing out of place is the big metal desk blocking the door, and nothing else appears to be damaged or destroyed. I can clear the rest of the building later, once I have Ines safely inside and we’ve both recovered.

It takes real effort to move the desk, but I’m able to lift one side of it and shove it out of the way, getting the door open and enabling me to help Ines through before I move the desk back into place. Helping her to her feet, I use my flashlight to survey the area before us: an open lobby with doors leading to other rooms on all sides. The front desk is to our right, clean as a whistle, with no papers or anything on it, except for a phone and a microphone that I assume is for the PA system. Behind it, an empty office. We stagger around the front desk and into the office, which has a door at the other end as well. I lead us through that, ready to drop Ines and pull my gun out at any moment, but this room is just as clean. I see a name panel on the desk that says “Chief Ritmiller”, and a place where a computer used to be. I notice that the computer monitor has been unplugged and is sitting on the floor in the corner.

“Matt…” Ines gasps.

“Shhhh…” I reply. “Hold on just a few more seconds.”

I take her bag from around her, including her bedroll, and I find spot behind the desk that is big enough for her. I lay the bedroll down as a headrest, then I lay her down as gently as I can.

“I’m okay,” she says, still trying to catch her breath. I investigate the doors to the chief’s office, one in front of the desk and one to the left of the desk which leads to more offices. Both doors are perfectly intact and made of solid wood. I close and lock both of them, using both the knob locks and deadbolts. This room has no windows, so that won’t be a problem.

“We’ll stay in here for tonight,” I tell her.

“Good,” she sighs. “Do you think they’ll come?”

The picture of those mutants on the roof of the house, with the big, tall one screeching in victory as they watch us run, is seared into my memory. My adrenaline is fading out of my system, and I find myself sweating and panting.

“I sure hope not,” I say, feeling cold. I turn off my flashlight and sink down against the wall next to her. Both of us lay there, panting in the dark, happy to be alive and still in each other’s company.

“Whew…hey, Matt?”

“Yeah…?”

“God, you’re…you’re fast…”

“Uh…thanks…”

“Where’d you learn…to run like that…?”

“Uh…dunno…track in high school, maybe…?”

Ines snickers. “Was it a…private school for…royalty?”

I wish she could see me roll my eyes. “…whatever, Blanch…”