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Scar-Face

 Ines has the fire going by the time I’m back. She’s started it in one of the big carts, putting some of the boards and wood shavings into the largest hovel in the cart and lighting it with her lighter. As I approach, she’s getting two big hunks of meat ready to cook, using her pocket knife to cut them into pieces that will cook faster. She puts the meat into the two halves of the mess set and uses a pair of gloves to insert them into the fire.

 The cafeteria is dark, even with the dim light coming in, and so the fire casts eerie shadows on the walls and floor. It’s strange for me to feel this uneasy during the day – this is usually the time I’m out scavenging or traveling. The break from the normal routine is unwelcome – another strange feeling since I’ve been so happy to have Ines distracting me from my monotonous voyage ever since I met her.

 She’s still not speaking to me, at least not yet. I stand there and look at her. My whole body itches to get moving, and I want to start out at a fairly brisk pace, but the meat is cooking and the smell of it is making me salivate. I can’t tell whether the growling is my stomach or my annoyance at her, but I sigh and walk over to wait for the food to be done. I’m pleased (and a little surprised) to see that she’s made enough for the both of us, but I’m sure she did it to make it necessary for me to stay here with her and not just out of the goodness of her heart.

 I would thank her, but the tension between us precludes all of the mealtime niceties. We eat in silence, and after a minute or two, she picks up her half of the food and begins to roam around the large room. I’m assuming she didn’t like how I just stood there, eating quickly, watching her and waiting for her to be ready. She’s taking her time on purpose, just to antagonize me.

 After she has made two complete circles around the room, with slight deviations here and there for good measure, I approach her and intercept her prowling.

 “Time to go?” I ask, hoping that the question form of the request will make her more likely to comply. Not so.

 “I had an aunt and uncle in Paris when it all started,” she tells me. I wasn’t expecting that. I figured I’d get some sassy remark from her. Even though she tells me in a very detached, superior tone, the content catches me off-guard. I don’t respond verbally, so she continues.

 “We heard from them very fast, and they said the same things were happening over there.”

 I wait, and when she doesn’t say anymore, I venture to inquire as neutrally as I can.

 “Are you ready to go?”

 She doesn’t give my question the dignity of a response. She simply looks at me with her nose in the air and cocks her head.

 “The French try to be accepting and tolerant of other people’s ideas, you know,” she says with a bit of a smirk.

 Her self-righteousness infuriates me. Before I even realize that the words are coming out of my mouth, I reply, “Then they’re probably all dead by now.”

 Immediately, I know I’ve said something I shouldn’t have even before I see her expression. The look on her face hits me like a punch in the gut, and for a moment both of us just stand there, staring at one another. I feel all twisted inside, and I know I’m the one that did the twisting. This time, there’s no way my pride will hold me back from making amends for my harsh words.

 But it’s too late – a second passes, which seems like an hour, and then Ines simply turns away and heads toward the cafeteria doors.

 “Ines, wait, I’m sorry…” I say, pleading after her. She ignores me and exits the room, heading for the lobby. I follow. When she comes to the lobby, I see her try to move the desk from the front door. She’s still not quite strong enough and her grunting signals me to speak again.

 “Ines, look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sure your aunt and uncle are fine.”

 “You don’t know that,” Ines spits back at me. “You don’t know anything.”

 I pause as she continues to wrestle with the desk, trying to choose my words carefully for a change.

 “I…I know that I shouldn’t have said what I did,” I tell her. I’m not sure what else to say. “I’m sorry.”

 I consider pleading with her to let it go and continue to travel with me, but she waves me off.

 “Whatever,” she mutters, standing back and kicking the desk in frustration. “Let’s just go.”

 I blink, trying to figure out if I’ve actually gotten what I wanted. It sure doesn’t feel like it. Even in my isolation-induced social apathy, I know better than to leave things this way.

 “No…” I say carefully, slowly, then speaking up. “No, Ines, hold on.” I move to her right so that I’m standing in between her and the window that’s still boarded up, leaning against the desk as I speak.

 “Look, Ines, if we’re gonna travel together...you do still want to, right?”

 Ines doesn’t look me in the eye. “Not much choice,” she grumbles.

 I hang my head. “Well…if we’re gonna partner up, we’ll have to…I dunno, I guess we have to work through this…be on the same page and all that…”

 Ines frowns, then looks up at me with an earnest expression that might be adorable if the situation was different. “Just promise me that you won’t go around just killing them if you don’t have to.”

 I sigh, relieved. Whether they’re human or not, I can definitely work with that. “Believe me, Ines, I’d rather avoid them altogether if we can. No fighting or killing necessary if we do it that way.”

 That seems to satisfy her. She gives me a sort of half smile, even though her eyes are elsewhere, thinking of other things. I nudge her shoulder with my hand very noncommittally.

 “And I don’t know about your relatives in France, but if they’re half as stubborn as you are, I’m sure they’re doing fine.”

 That brings out the full smile I wanted to see. Looking at that smile, the tension just eases right out of me, and the warmth of human companionship returns.

 I take in a breath to explain to her that I’ll help her move this desk so we can leave, even though there’s a perfectly open window right behind her, but my eye catches something in the light of that window. It’s just the faintest movement of a shadow, but it’s there.

 My mind attempts to process it, but before it does, there’s a horrid sound of shattering wood. The boarded window behind me is blown open and an omnipotent force grabs me from behind. I feel my feet leave the solid floor and watch them trail the rest of me as I’m torn from the building. My voice is caught in my throat, so I can’t yell, but it wouldn’t have been heard if I had because the roar of the enormous male cannibal as he hurls me to the ground is too loud for anyone to hear anything else. He doesn’t just throw me, either; he lifts me up by the backpack and flings me over his head, tossing me into the chain-link fence gate that’s held together by my tire-iron. I travel through that, tearing it open, and hit the ground on my chest. My head scrapes against the asphalt roughly and I see stars. My hearing is overtaken by the noise of multiple mutant roars and growls as they barge into the police station, and then Ines’s scream.

 Vaguely, through the haze, I hear a gunshot, then a second, then a third. Another scream from Ines and more roars from the monsters. Then, just screams, fading into the background, and the sounds of bodies colliding.

 I moan, aware of my voice, and I turn over, trying to focus my eyes. The formerly boarded-up window is now just a large, jagged opening in the side of the building, and I don’t see anyone in the lobby inside. I panic. I would shout Ines’s name, but I can’t find my voice fully just yet.

 I stagger to my feet, trying to make sure I still have everything on me and that it still works, and then I hear Ines’s scream come from somewhere deeper inside the building, followed by shrieks and roars from the mutants. The fact that she’s still alive and also in danger spurs me to action. I leave my short sword and my bow where they are, and pull out my new 9mm pistol. I haven’t tested it yet, nor do I know for sure if it even has all its parts, but I’m not about to let Ines die. And at least if I can’t save her, I won’t let her die alone.

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 With my hood pulled over my head, I more easily blend in with the dim surroundings of the unlit building. The weight of the gun in my hand is comforting, but even so, I tread carefully as I follow the sounds coming from the back of the station. I hear Ines struggling amid the communication between the mutants, and I find myself sneaking right back to the doors of the cafeteria. I can see the fire is still going, judging from the way the dancing shadows form on the floor and the wall in the orange light in front of the door.

 I peer around the corner carefully and take in the scene, nervous about what I might see. Thank God, she’s alive! The creatures are gathered around her – there are five of them. One of them appears to be an old, scraggly male, bent over, using all four limbs to walk, wearing some form of loin cloth rags. Two of the others are also male, but they stand upright, and they are the pale, more human-looking kind. They’re dressed in rags as well, but one of them carries a bone weapon in each hand, and both of them are pressing in around their captive victim. The fourth is a female, a scrawny, thin female with hardly any clothes on. However, what parts of her aren’t covered with cloth are hidden behind a mixture of dirt, blood, and foliage. Her hair is all matted and stringy, and her jaw is lean and pointed. She’s doing most of the noise-making, and she doesn’t seem to like Ines at all. She’s up in her face, screeching, raising her hands as if to strike her, prowling around her in circles.

 And then there’s the last one, the big male. Just the sight of him gives me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. He’s at least a full head taller than any of the mutants present, dressed in what looks to me like some sort of tribal battle garb, which includes various types of bone jewelry, cloth garments adorned with strange symbols and images drawn in blood, and battle paint (probably made from blood as well) in symmetrical patterns all over his face and bald head. He’s looking around the room, and I see him use his incredible strength to overturn one of the meal-time carts, flipping it over with one swinging motion.

The crash alerts the other mutants around Ines and makes them flinch. The male turns, and I see his face clearly in the light. He has scars all over his flesh, and for a moment it reminds me of how I appeared the last time I looked in the mirror. His mouth is turned down in a permanent scowl, baring his teeth along his strong jawline. The creature is built like a fitness instructor or an elite soldier, and his stern expression seems to communicate more intelligently than the majority of his mutant brethren.

The blood-covered female is getting louder. She shrieks at Ines with greater volume than ever, spittle flying from her mouth as Ines tries to cover her ears. The female interprets this as a sign of weakness and slaps her in the side of the head, but then the alpha male approaches. He is in their midst before they can react, and he grabs the female by the hair with a loud bellow, bringing his other hand across her face in a gesture that I can only interpret as disciplinary. In their confusion and focus on their own social problems, I silently move into the room, keeping to the shadow, blending in with my black coat and hood. I need to get closer to take the shots.

As I move, I also watch the societal drama unfolding in front of me, and I wonder to myself why they haven’t killed Ines yet. The male tosses the female aside, who submissively lays where she is thrown, not daring to look into the big male’s eyes as he leans down next to her head and snarls in her ear. One of the other males, the one holding the bone weapons, makes a move against Ines, and I step forward, raising my gun.

But the big male beats me to it. He whirls around, grabbing one of the weapons out of his fellow cannibal’s hand, and propels his rival backward with a mighty kick. The mutant falls, then attempts to rise. The alpha doesn’t even let him get to his feet. He’s on him in a second, swinging the bone-club with blows that elicit a sickening crunching noise, like a meat tenderizer turning a rack of ribs into mush. It doesn’t take very many of them before the rival male’s corpse is nearly unrecognizable.

The alpha turns, his chest puffed out in pride as the other three mutants cower in his presence, and lets out another self-aggrandizing roar. In the chaos, I’ve moved so that I’m close behind the line of three mutants, who are on their knees next to Ines, trying to make sure she can’t escape, but also not wanting to appear to be taking something that obviously belongs to their superior. I’m close enough to leap in for the kill at just the right moment, but I have to do this just right. One wrong move and that big alpha male will be on me faster than I could ever react. Ines’s bag is on the ground next to the newly killed mutant, so it’s well out of reach from where I am now. I need to have a melee weapon ready just in case I lose my gun in the tussle. This is where my katana will definitely come in handy. I have to hit them fast and hard, so hard that even the big male will be overwhelmed. This is his territory, and he’ll be angry enough. I need to hit them fast so that his anger will be turned into fear long enough for me to grab Ines and go.

The alpha male approaches Ines, and I see him slip his bone weapon into what looks to be an old leather belt around his waist. The way he’s looking at Ines makes me extremely uncomfortable, and there’s something different about the way he walks just now. He peers down at her and his mouth twists up into a grotesque, malicious grin. I can hear Ines’s breathing become nervous, and she tries to scoot back, but is blocked by the old, scraggly male and the last remaining healthy, young one. The female screeches again, sounding rather indignant, and when the alpha male begins to approach my companion, I suddenly realize why Ines hasn’t been killed and consumed. I realize why the female’s protests are so vocal – it’s because she’s been replaced.

At the realization, mind flashes forward several minutes to a scene involving the alpha male taking Ines as his own, his prize, and I want to vomit. My stomach flutters for a second, but only for a second. The nausea is pushed aside by a most intense, livid anger. Something deep inside me, something primal, clicks, as though my own mate is being threatened. Of course that’s not exactly the case, but my rudimentary instincts drown out any rationalization to the point where the distinction no longer matters.

I’m about five feet away when I pull the trigger. The bullet goes into the head of the young male to the right, causing him to slump over. The other three all leap back at the sound of the gunshot, and Ines screams, covering her head and hitting the deck. I point and fire again, but there’s no loud pop – the weapon jams! The split second with no shots gives them time to recover. When the trigger makes a lame clicking sound, and nothing comes out of the barrel, I immediately drop it and reach for my katana.

The female leaps forward at me, trying to get to me first. I spin out of the way and she slams headfirst into the old male, causing both of them to stagger. I yell and drive my foot into her back, sending both of them to the floor and drawing my katana at the same time, turning to face what I know will definitely be the more serious threat of the alpha male. He rips the bone weapon from his belt and looks at me with rage. He roars at me, furious that I would dare to threaten his territory and his trophy.

Ines screams again, and I think she may be trying to say my name in French. Her scream flips another switch inside me, a deep-seated fury that I’ve been holding in for longer than I was aware. It affects me on every level, and I start to see red around the edges of my eyes. When the alpha male leaps at me, instead of pausing and moving out of the way of my opponent’s attack, I do something that I never expected myself to do: I roar in return and charge the alpha male, my katana ready in my hands.

My first swing has all my power behind it, intended to take the male’s right arm, the one wielding the bone club. However, he swings his weapon as well, and so my sword simply shatters the club in a single blow. My next swing flows out of the circular motion of my first, a well-practice maneuver that I’ve been training with for over a decade. I feel my sword connect with something and pass through it, and the alpha male staggers backward. Before I can move in to take another swing, my adrenaline-fueled auditory sense detects something coming from my rear-right-hand side. I spin just in time to drive the hilt of my katana into the face of the old male, who is about bring both fists down on my back. I must have hit him harder than I realized, because he falls flat on his back, barely conscious, a red mess where his left eye had been just a millisecond ago.

Behind me, Ines is crouched, ready to run as the alpha male jumps to his feet. I do a visual check to see what part of him is missing. I’m disappointed to see that he still has all his limbs, but he’s holding his abdomen, and I see red leaking out through his fingers. He stares at the wound, utter astonishment on his face, and then turns his vengeful gaze to me. Even partly doubled over, he’s still taller than I am, a force to be reckoned with, and he knows it.

He snarls, and I step back toward Ines, one hand reaching back automatically to shield her from his anger. The other two, the old man now known by me as One-Eye and the female that I’ve mentally dubbed Bloody Mary, have gathered behind him, trying to place him between them and myself. The female is cowering behind his bulk and the old male is holding the ravaged left side of his face. The alpha holds up his hand, dripping and glistening with his blood. His wound goes clear across his stomach, but he seems to be feeding off his pain. He gestures sharply, flicking the blood to the floor, and starts forward again.

But there’s something in his step, something in the way his body is turned just a little to the side, that I can just barely detect. It’s not much, but it’s there – it’s hesitation. I’ve rattled him. No matter how small, there’s a part of him that now fears me, and fears what I can do.

Still staying between the mutants and Ines, I step forward, displaying as much confidence as I have in me, and stomp onto the ground, bringing my katana up into a fighting stance, letting out the loudest yell I can. I feel the blood surging through my veins; I’m ready to charge at all three of them if I have to, swinging with abandon, separating heads from shoulders, legs from hips, anything from everything else. My muscles feel like they’re going to burst, and in that moment, I feel almost as powerful as the alpha male looks to be.

The male flinches and halts his advance, crouching into a similar fighting pose, trying to be ready for any attack I might bring to him. He leans forward ever so slightly, his face clearly illuminated in the dying light of the fire, and our eyes meet.

I’m amazed by how effortlessly we, as two different species, are able to communicate. His voice doesn’t have a lot of volume, but the vocal noise he utters sounds almost human enough to be considered an attempt at speech. He lets out a low, ominous hum, baring his teeth at me. He holds up a fist to further communicate his rage. A challenge.

I decide to reply in as firm a tone as I can muster. “Back…up…”

He pauses, still glaring at me. His nostrils flare with every breath he takes. The blood vessels in his neck and head bulge and throb. Unless the fire is playing tricks on my vision, his face even appears to be turning a deep shade of red. His anger at being challenged is indescribable.

It’s then that I notice a drop of blood fall from my blade onto the floor. My eyes go to my katana, and to the thin line of mutant blood that rests on the razor edge, slowly forming into another drop. When I return my glare to the alpha, I can tell he noticed it, too. He snarls again, but it’s born from frustration this time.

I grit my teeth and inch forward. “Get…out…!”

The alpha blinks and takes a step back, and it’s then that I know I’ve won the standoff. I have him right where I want him. I stand up to my full height, brandishing my almighty blade with a well-timed flourish that flicks the mutant’s own blood onto the floor at his feet. With two more steps in their direction, Bloody Mary and One-Eye flee the room, their supreme confidence in their king all but vanished. The male stands straight as well, his lips pressed tightly together, looking down his nose at my superior weapon. He can’t take his eyes off of it.

“Time to go, Scar-Face,” I announce sternly.

As if he actually understands me, his entire body quivers with anger, and for a moment I think he’s about to attack me again. When he moves suddenly I flinch and brace myself, even with my sword held up in front of me, but he just fades away into the dim light, disappearing through the double doors of the cafeteria. I feel his heavy, powerful footsteps through the floor beneath my feet as his long strides carry him out and away at speeds I can probably only reach in my dreams. Then, silence. No mutant roars, no shrieks, no cries, nothing. It’s the dead-quiet of peace.

My strength almost leaves me completely, and I rest the tip of my sword on the floor, going down to one knee to catch my breath. Ines creeps up beside me, and I feel her hands on my shoulders as she rests her head on my arm. Both of us sit there together, trying to catch our breath for a little while in the firelight. After about a minute, we stand together and face one another. I must still be pretty red in the face and neck, and Ines looks as pale as I’ve ever seen her. As tired as I am, I can’t ignore the overwhelming feeling of joy at seeing her unharmed. Neither of us really knows what to say.

Eventually, predictably, Ines goes first.

“…time to go…?”

I know we need to find her things and get moving, but half of me just wants to lie down and sleep. Even so, I nod feebly.

“Let’s get outta here…”