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Window Shopping

 We’ve lost at least half the day’s light, but we’re glad to be alive. It’s fascinating how each brush with death makes me grateful for any meager source of enjoyment, even something as simple as a beautiful sunset or a gentle breeze against my scarred face. And then, a day later (sometimes less than), I’m back in my typical, practical, do-what-needs-to-be-done mindset, and I all but ignore the simple joys of being alive. But now, I have a new companion to share in the relief, and the fact that both of us have survived only makes my gratefulness more acute and satisfactory. I feel as though we will be absolutely just fine – mentally, emotionally, physically – as long as we stick together and keep one another’s hearts beating. And, most importantly, as long as we keep some distance between ourselves and that monstrous alpha mutant, Scar-Face, and his servile pack.

 I keep replaying the scenes with him in them over and over in my mind like a horror movie. I have never seen his equal among the cannibals – he’s by far the largest, strongest, most intimidating monstrosity I’ve encountered since this whole apocalypse began, and I am not eager in any way to see his face again.

That rage-filled expression crisscrossed with poignant marks that ironically reminds me so much of my own marred visage haunts my dreams for several nights to come. Ines and I make our way down the long, winding road, stopping to rest only when we must. Her strength has mostly returned to her – she isn’t the weak and helpless woman who struggled to keep up on the way to the police station. I suspect the encounter with Scar-Face, One-Eye, and Bloody Mary has put a fair bit of fight back into her limbs, which are beginning to fill out more appropriately now that she is eating regularly.

Still, everything positive is always accompanied by a corresponding negative. I may be infinitely grateful to have her company, but the two of us are consuming twice as much food and water. Our filtered water bottles have taken the anxiety out of scouring all of creation in search of clean water, but we’re having to stop twice as many times to make sure they stay full. I don’t want to take our access to water for granted; I make sure we fill up at every opportunity, and it is costing us travel time.

Our food stores are also quickly depleted. The meat lasts longer than everything else. Even the gallon can of green beans is gone before the meat bag goes empty. I’ve been able to keep us reasonably stocked by using my bow to hunt for fresh game, but so far I’ve been only moderately successful. I’ve bagged three rabbits and a raccoon, which keeps us going after the rest of the food runs out, but I’ve been unable to take down anything larger.

The food runs out at the worst time. Ines estimates we have about three days left of carefully rationed meat, and we’re in the middle of a rural section of the country. A few miles back, we passed a place where a “Welcome to…” sign for a state used to be, but it was destroyed and illegible, so neither of us have any real idea where we are. It could be just a few more miles to the next ruined town, or it could be more than fifty. At least the countryside isn’t so densely populated with roving bands of cannibals. Ines and I had to hunker down in a cornfield late one night as they came charging through in a small pack of four or five. They scampered right on by without finding us, and the fact that Scar-Face wasn’t with them was deeply reassuring. We couldn’t tell if they were headed somewhere specific, hunting something or someone, or just out on patrol (if they even do that sort of thing).

The encounter with Scar-Face and his minions has left me questioning the intellect of these creatures. I still don’t see them as any more human than I did before (despite Ines’s occasional attempts to convince me otherwise), but that’s not because the evidence isn’t there. Mostly, I refuse to see their potential humanity because I have no other choice if I want to stay sane. To me, their structured behavior only makes their desire for human flesh and their brutality more terrifying and disgusting. The more humanized they become, the more frightened of them I am. It is easy to excuse their barbarism if they’re nothing more than semi-intelligent beasts. If only their human shape is what makes them similar to us, and in all other respects they’re mindless animals, then somehow that makes it less of a terror.

But for something that close to human, a desire for human flesh becomes even more unnatural, even more of an abomination, and my wanton slaughter of them in each encounter gnaws on me with increasing intensity. I’ve been calling them cannibals, but now the term seems to fit better than ever before, and that terrifies me.

Ignorance is truly bliss.

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“Well, that’s clearly a good idea,” I mutter.

Ines and I are standing at the top of a grassy ridge that was clearly manmade many years ago. The narrow hill separated the highway along which we’d been walking from the parking lot of the largest shopping center I’ve seen in all my nomadic wanderings. The lot has seen much better days – abandoned cars are scattered about in various stages of decline, and many of the tall lampposts have snapped off or are wilting like the burning wick of a candle.

The gigantic structure that once housed a bustling mall is in much better shape that I would have imagined, at least on the outside. Farther out, I can see a jagged opening in the roof that looks like a gigantic sinkhole, or maybe like a huge fist came from the sky and smashed right through the ceiling. Beyond the mall and its mostly vacant parking lot – a series of restaurants and winding roads leading to unfinished housing developments. We’ve clearly reached the end of our trek through a rural countryside.

Ines taps my arm and points. The two of us haven’t spoken a whole lot since leaving the police station, and that was a few days ago. We’ve been walking and focusing on the practical aspects of survival, so any discussion we’ve had has been confined to topics such as where to sleep, when to eat, and how to avoid being spotted. I don’t know about her, but during the long hours of walking and surveying the landscape, my thoughts have occasionally drifted back to our last conversation. I thought we had ended it on amiable terms, but the attack from Scar-Face interrupted us just as we seemed to be making headway. The nights recently have been cold and we’ve slept outside a few times, but in spite of all that we’ve maintained a distance from one another. I’m not sure what I’m looking for in terms of our solidarity, but I do know that what we have now isn’t it. The lighthearted banter between us hasn’t returned, so that might be a sign that we’re not fully reconciled. And, perhaps most bothersome, she hasn’t brought it up at all. I doubt she’s even given it a second thought, which I’ve thought is sort of backwards for the way our two genders usually handle things.

Ines is wordlessly pointing out across the wavy rooftop of the mall to something in the distance. I can’t quite make it out with my eyes, but a look through my scope confirms my fears. It’s one of their markers.

I curse, still peering through the scope, scanning the area for any additional signs of the mutants’ presence. I don’t see any, and so I take a closer look at the rooftop marker. It’s a few sticks tied together, set in between three large rocks, a few bones dangling from the top. The bones are completely bare of flesh, brown with the sun. The sticks themselves look like they’re about to completely rot away. As I open my mouth to comment on how old it looks, a gust of wind passes by and causes the marker to collapse into a pile of junk.

“Hmmm…” I muse. “Looks mostly clear.”

Ines doesn’t say anything. She’s still looking down, below the hill, at the space between us and the edge of the mall. The mound of earth we’re standing on was piled up and then held in place by the wall of cement, carving out a little one-way alley for delivery trucks to drop their loads. The large door that leads into what I would guess is the storeroom is halfway open, stuck in place after months and months of rust and disuse. I hear the howl of the wind as it moves through the opening.

The entire thing makes me uneasy. This was once a populated place, and the mutants were definitely here at one time in the past. A place as large as this may very well be a massive nesting ground for them, if they even have such things. Still, as I survey the multiple entrances I can see – entrances to a department store, a camping store, a shoe place, a main entrance, etc. – I have a hard time believing that we’re going to pass up an opportunity to scavenge an entire mall. We haven’t changed clothes in days, and we desperately need to find some more food. We’re almost guaranteed to find both in here somewhere. Plus, there’s bound to be a bookstore in here – I’m about ready to ditch *Fifty Shades* and *Art of War* for some new titles. What I wouldn’t give for a good classic, like *The Scarlet Letter*, or something by Shakespeare! Or, even better, some DC Comics.

Beside me, Ines takes a knee on the grass and brushes the hair from her face. She pulls out the paper I usually keep for the lists of things we need and also comes up with a pen – my pen. She must have assumed ownership of them when I wasn’t looking and never told me.

She begins to make a list, saying each item aloud. “Food…clothes…water…”

“Books…” I suggest. She adds it to the list.

She pauses, staring at the building for a long moment. Then, “A shower.”

I look at her. “A shower?”

She nods. “I miss those. A lot.”

I nod with her. I can’t even remember the last time I had one of those. It makes me want one really badly.

The brightness of the sun intensifies. It’s come out from behind the clouds. The brilliant colors of pink, orange, gold, and blue almost take my breath away, but they also remind me that we have about three hours of light left. We’ll be spending the night here.

One step takes me over the side of the mound and I slide quietly to the bottom. Ines comes down right after, and I hold up my hand, motioning for her to stop so that we can listen. All we hear is the wind as we stand at the dark, gaping mouth of the storeroom entrance.

“Ready?” I ask her. She nods.

I pull out my short sword and hear the noise of her collapsible baton extending. Our flashlights click on at the same moment. Side-by-side, we enter the ghost-mall.

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The mall looks so much bigger without any people. There are places where the railings have come loose and tumbled down to the first floor from above, and the skylight is either broken or covered with dirt and gunk. The whole place is very dark, with the light filtering down from the roof in small, thin beams that only seem to target empty spots on the floor. In a few places, the roof has come down and the evening light floods in, illuminating our way.

Right away, we go up to the second floor - I feel much more secure and safe from up there. Even though it seems like we’re just on the middle level inside the guts of some giant, dead worm made of metal and plastic, I still feel better knowing that we won’t be ambushed like we would down on the bottom. The whole place is so quiet, another thing I have a hard time getting used to. The shops around us are suspended in a sort of silent, frozen chaos. I’ve never seen a place so thoroughly trashed, with so much vegetation taking over. Looters clearly hit this place right at the beginning, and I suspect they’ve kept doing so in the months since then. The wind plays tricks on us, making noise from the wide halls and narrow archways far ahead and close behind. Once, I hear a scuffling behind us and whirl with my sword to see the wind dragging an old, empty plastic bag across the muddy tile floor. At first, I’m embarrassed, but then I look up and see the relief on Ines’s face.

We hear our own hearts in our ears as we jump at every little creak, every snap of a twig or plop, every sudden animal noise. All of it echoes on forever in the endless, dark halls, everything accompanied by the constant undertone of crickets and the wind. I’m used to my flashlight showing me the path in front and behind, lightning up the narrow halls and stairways a few feet at a time in suburban houses or barns. Here, our flashlights show us only enough to let us take the next several steps. The halls are too wide and too long to show us everything, leaving plenty of dark around us for our imaginations to fill in the rest.

I’m surprised we’re walking upright, our backs straight, and not crouched as we round every corner. My adrenaline isn’t racing through me like I thought it would be. We stick to the light as much as possible, and when we do, my eyes catch sight of some places I make a mental note to come back and visit later. There’s a clothing store (the letters to the name above the entrance have been gone for a long time), a bookstore, a bath products shop, a store for home appliances, and an electrical store. My mind immediately conjures up a vision of clean clothes, washing my hoodie-coat, taking a nice, hot shower, running my hands through clean-feeling hair.

But first, we have to find a place to sleep for tonight, if that even possible. We’re already too far into the mall to turn back. By the time we get back outside, it’ll be dark, and neither Ines nor I are interested in wandering around at night looking for a camping site. I keep my eyes peeled for a small, secluded shop with only one entrance that we can easily wall off somehow, maybe with heavy bookshelves.

As I’m peering into one such area, I hear Ines call to me in a low voice from the other side of the hall. I rush over and see her aiming her light at a nearby door. It’s covered in vines and rust, but I can still make out most of the words.

*Security. Authorized personnel only.*

The handle is gone, a rust-covered hole where it used to be. The door is jammed in place, and I know I’ll have to pry and yank to get it open.

I hand my flashlight to Ines.

“Watch my back,” I whisper as I pull the crowbar from the carabiner on my backpack.

She gives me a strange look, one that I can’t really place, especially in this dim light, and I stare back at her. After a moment, she nods and turns both lights back to our rear, keeping one pointed down each side of the hallway.

I ram the crowbar into the small wedge I’ve created in the door, trying to be careful not to damage the door itself. We want to get in, but I want to be able to shut it and secure it once we’re inside.

It takes me less than a minute to pry the door free and push it open, and only once does it make a noise loud enough to worry me. The moment it’s open, I give Ines a tap on the shoulder and take my flashlight back. Stowing my crowbar and pulling my short sword out of the gap in the wall I’d shoved it in, I carefully scan the security office for threats.

Movement from the up and to the left makes me freeze, and two pairs of large eyes reflect the light. I raise my weapon, and the pair of possums stares back at me wordlessly from the rafters. I sweep the rest of the office, seeing only overturned chairs and broken computer monitors. In the far corner next to another door is what’s left of a skeleton, the head and legs missing.

Ines follows me inside, aiming her flashlight down a hall to the right with a door at the end. The ceiling is low and the room is wide. The desks on the left, beneath the possums, were where the security officers used to sit and stare at screens all day. I wonder what the shift was like when the mutants came barging through. Did the people see them on the screens as they attacked, tearing the shoppers to pieces before they charged into the office? Did any of the security personnel decide to go out there and try to help? Or did they all hunker down inside here and wait for the end? Other than the lone remnants of the skeleton in the corner, there don’t appear to be any human or mutant remains, so either the security guards all left the room voluntarily, or they were dragged out kicking and screaming when they were finally discovered.

Ines pushes the door shut behind us, and I help her grab one of the desks from the one side and push it in front of the rusted metal entrance. I’m pleased to find that the carpeted floor of the room, shielded from the majority of nature’s invasion, is pretty clean. There are no windows, and it only takes me a few minutes to determine that the other two doors are secure. Whoever was here last locked them with the deadbolts, which have rusted over and are likely never to move again until they fall apart. The ceiling concerns me more, but scanning it carefully with our flashlights reveals that the rafters are solid and there’s no visible way in or out through there.

Ines helps me look for a brief period, but then stops and just watches me, not sure what else I’m looking for. Still, I can’t relax until I’ve made certain. After about fifteen minutes of making sure we’re secure, I sigh and sink into one of the remaining chairs.

Unbeknownst to me, one of the legs has rusted away, and my weight is too much. It snaps, and I tumble backward and sideways to the floor. I quickly get up, but Ines saw the whole thing. I spot her with her hand over her mouth, hiding a big grin.

I stop and stare at the chair, then look at Ines and sigh exasperatedly.

“Ines, I don’t think this room is safe,” I say.

She snickers. “Oh, so we *must* leave,” she concludes.

I look around, then motion to the door.

“Ladies first,” I offer with a bow.

She grabs my shoulders and stands me up straight.

“Careful!” she warns. “We don’t want you to fall over again for no reason.”

I laugh, and so does she. The tension from the past few days starts to melt away, and her yawn is contagious. We put our packs in the corner under one of the desks, and I take inventory while Ines sets up her blanket roll. We’re good on tools and equipment, but the food category is seriously lacking.

“Alright,” I sigh as she gets settled in, laying face-down on her blanket. “What’ll it be? Do we want to boil our extension cord wrapped in toilet paper, or do we cook the rope and season it with salt?”

“Hmmm…sounds chewy,” she hums. She looks up and gives me a pouty face. “Does that mean we have to save the…what’s it called?…the *hydrogen* *peroxide* for another day?”

I chuckle at the way she said the chemical, then look in her sack to find what she’s talking about.

“Two bottles,” I tell her. “One for you, one for me?”

She rolls over and smiles at me. “Mmmmm…sounds delightful.”

I stare at her, suddenly feeling guilty that we have nothing to eat today. I don’t know why I feel like apologizing, but I think that maybe I should have tried harder to hunt or scavenge some food in the past few days. It’s not really fair to me to blame myself - Ines and I both have done our fair share of the work and eaten our fair share of the food, and we both try to make sure we divide the food up as equally as possible. Still, I can’t shake the uncomfortable feeling. Ines doesn’t seem perturbed by it, though. She’s just looking at me upside down with a sweet smile on her face.

“We’ll find something tomorrow,” she says. “It’s not like we could build a fire in here anyway.”

She’s right. It helps with my guilt a little.

I lean back against the wall next to the desk and yawn again, causing her to yawn, too. I stretch out my arms and legs, groaning, feeling the stress of the day in my joints, especially my back. As I tilt my head back, I look up and see those two little faces in the rafters again. The possums are still there, staring at me. It freaks me out a little, but as I look at them, the lightbulb goes off in my head. We shut them in. They’re trapped in here.

I roll over and grab my bow, fitting an arrow into it, keeping another two close at hand. I’m going to have to move fast once the first shot goes off. Taking aim at one pair of those cute eyes just a few feet away, if I miss this shot, I tell myself, I am truly pathetic.

The first possum drops to the floor and flops over toward Ines, making her yelp. I hear her baton extend in the dimness. My next shot at the fleeing possum misses, embedding in the ceiling, but my third shot hits it right in the broadside. It cries out, and for a moment I feel sorry as it writhes on the floor, but my stomach growls just then. I pounce on it, grabbing it by the body and head. When I mercifully twist, I hear the snap, and it goes limp. I see Ines on her feet, backing away and getting her flashlight. She points it at me as I lift up the two skewered fur balls by their tails with a big grin.

“Matt?! Wha-?”

“I caught us some breakfast,” I proudly proclaim. I laugh, unable not to after seeing the trying-to-decide-how-to-feel-about-this expression on her face. While I wait for her to select her response, I toss the two carcasses into the opposite corner of the room and then take off my blood-stained gloves. I remove my coat and shiver a little as the chilled air hits my skin. I have on a t-shirt over a sleeveless t-shirt, but I feel my sweat from earlier in the day turn icy-cold when I sit back down. I look at Ines, strangely thinking to myself how bad I likely smell, though I’ve noticed it before. My mind wanders to the concept of a shower. How did those work again?

“Matt…” she says.

*“Uh-oh…there’s that tone in her voice again…”*

“Yeah?” I glance at her, and she looks rather uncomfortable. She gets up and comes over to me, sitting down next to me against the wall. She fiddles with her hands, the flashlight dancing on the wall and floor.

“When I was in college, I joined a group called *Ceux Conscients*, The Aware Ones. They were a social activist group that dedicated themselves to promoting safety for women against sexual predators. It’s funny…it helped me stay alive before…well, before you found me.”

I sit there, staring straight ahead, listening to her talk, and I’m wondering what her point will be.

“One night, we went out to eat and I had a friend walk me to my car. His name was Pierre…I know, it’s the most stereotypical name for a French boy, but that was his name. Anyway, there were two punks waiting for me, et Pierre stood up to them. He was fearless.”

She tilts toward me, and I can feel the easing of the tension between us as our shoulders touch.

“When you stood up to those monsters, you reminded me of him. Except louder.”

I chuckle. “Well, I wasn’t going to let them take you.” As I speak, I’m reminded of our conversation from before the attack. “I was going to do whatever it took to stop them. I’m sure Pierre would have done the same for you.”

I can see Ines smile in the dancing light. “Pierre didn’t have any swords or guns,” she says, looking at me with a cheeky grin. “I think that makes him braver than you.”

I roll my eyes. “Your compliments are what get me up in the morning.”

Ines giggles, then grows solemn very quickly. She sighs and looks at her feet, resting her head on my shoulder. “I wonder what Pierre’s doing right now…I wonder if he’s…”

I nudge her gently. “Don’t,” I tell her quietly. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

She sighs again, and I put my arm around her shoulders, giving her a small squeeze. Looking around, I feel more relaxed than I have in a long time. I’m safe, breakfast is taken care of, and I have a friend who I know will be here in the morning. I extricate myself from our resting spot and undo my boots. The leather creaks as I tug on it – I haven’t taken my feet out of these things in at least a week. I brace myself for the intense stink, but I’m surprised to find that nothing changes.

Ines snorts. “We already smell *terrible*,” she says with French pronunciation.

“Yeah, but I’m gonna sleep well tonight,” I exclaim. “If this keeps up, I’m gonna need to find some blankets of my own.”

Ines gets to her feet, reaching for her bedroll. “We can share mine tonight if you want.”

I shine the flashlight at her, looking at her face as she unrolls her blankets. Did she mean that? And, if she did, what I will do? She looks at me, then stops, realizing the details of her offer. She turns red and looks away, so I fill the silence for her.

“Uhhh…thanks, but I think I’ll just look for some tomorrow,” I try to say without laughing.

There’s a bit more silence, and then I add to my statement.

“You can just imagine some other man sharing the blankets with you.”

“Shut-up!” she yells with a grin.

I hear her pick something up, and then something metal hits my face. The mess kit.

“That’ll teach you to keep your mouth shut, *Your Majesty!*”