15

Ruba-dub-dub

By the time I’m awake the next morning, Ines is already up and busying herself packing. I’m pleasantly surprised to find that she’s already packed my things. Propping myself up on my elbows, I discover that she’s covered me in her blanket. I take in a deep, waking breath; it smells like her (and not in a bad way).

“Someone’s in a hurry,” I say groggily. She looks back at me and smiles.

“I want to get moving,” she eagerly expresses. “We have this whole place to search.”

She stops and comes over to me as I sit up. In the middle of my yawn, she takes my face in one hand, shocking me out of my tired state.

“Your face…” she murmurs. I pull away, unsure.

“Uh, yeah, I know, it’s a terrible thing…”

“No…” she tells me in a contemplative tone. “It looks…good…since you were hurt in the fight.”

I stare at her as she stares at me, then grin and raise an eyebrow. “Well of course,” I coo. “You can’t keep beauty like this down forev--”

She pushes my face aside before I can finish my sentence, rolling her eyes.

“You really do have to ruin everything,” she grumbles with a slight smile.

We exit the room and the place is surprisingly much brighter than it was the day before. There are no clouds, and the sun cuts right through the broken overhead window, giving light where there was none. We quickly get a fire going and cook the first possum, relishing the gamey taste compared to the lack of a proper meal yesterday evening. I clean the second one and tie it to my backpack by its tail, which bothers Ines a little but for some reason amuses me quite a bit.

Ines and I discuss our agenda for the day. Both of us are pretty excited over the possibility of finding new clothes and a shower, which seems to get her pretty wound up, more so than usual. It’s rare that food and/or water makes second place on the list, but it does today. To be fair, we can’t count on the possibility that we’ll ever be able to do this again.

We start out, leaving all the unrequired material in our little safe room, and head out to see what we can find. It takes me a few minutes to realize that I have no sense of danger. I’m so anticipating what we might get today that I’m moving much more easily. There’s a swagger in my step, and my chest tightens up at the risk we’ve already taken so far. Ines notices (I can tell she does by her expression when my posture changes), but she doesn’t say anything. While our excitement gives us a sense of safety, both of us have our sidearms at our hips, and my short sword is continually at the ready.

The mall looks just as tattered in the daylight as it did when we first got here yesterday evening. The floor can hardly be seen among all the grime and filth that’s accumulated on it. The first shop we stop at is an old bath store. For whatever reason, there are old rolls of toilet paper all over the place. I pick up two of the cleaner ones and pack them away, then look at the rest of them.

“There’s enough here to TP a mansion,” I chuckle. Ines gives me a strange look.

“To what?”

“TP a mansion,” I repeat, like somehow saying something she doesn’t get will magically make her understand. “Did you never do that as a kid?”

“What is it? You just throw it everywhere?”

“Yeah, all over. You take one end and toss the roll so that it covers everything.”

Ines stares at me blankly.

“Then what?” she asks.

“Then you laugh and run away, and the owner of the house or car has to come and clean it up,” I tell her with a big smile.

She gives me a sideways look and shakes her head.

“Strange American pranks,” she mutters.

“Oh, like everything you do in France makes total sense.”

“Of course it does,” she says casually, putting out her dainty hand. “We are civilized.”

“You mean like Rémi Gaillard?”

She shoots me a mischievous grin. “Exactly.”

The next store we pause to investigate appears to have once been a clothing store for teen girls, judging by the faded-out colors. Ines demands we stop in, saying that she’s going to teach me how to properly shop for a woman, and I watch her in a mostly disinterested manner. I make sure to look around for anything that might be useful, but whatever was remotely worthy of my attention in a store like this is long gone, if it was ever here in the first place. Back in the stockroom, Ines finds one or two articles of clothing, and I remind her that we’re looking for things that are actually suitable to our present condition. She gives me a retort as we exit the store, and half of it is in French, so I don’t pay much attention, which earns me more French comments, some of which are probably swear words.

However, when we pass a shop that used to sell high-end suits, I’m the victim of my own rhetoric.

“Gimme a second to look in here,” I say to her.

Ines looks at me incredulously.

“*Es-tu sérieux?*”

“Hey, we spent time shopping for you. My turn.”

She rolls her eyes and follows me in. This store still has much of its merchandise hanging elegantly on the rails, well-dressed ghosts of another age. The sight of this kind of thing makes me think back. It’s been such a long time since I was in a suit…I remember being clad in a slick, gray suit with a red tie during the graduation ceremony at the school where I was teaching the year before all this happened. I think back to my closet with the three suits that I owned, two of which were gifts from relatives, and I wonder what ever became of them. They weren’t exactly on the top of my list when I gathered my essentials and left the property in the hands of God’s providence. Did anyone take them when my house was looted along with the rest? Or are they still hanging there because no one was alive to take anything?

Briefly, I wonder what the mutants would look like in one of these suits. Those commercials with the Neanderthals sometimes cleaned them up a little and put them into suits, and they actually looked mostly presentable. Would it be possible to do the same with the cannibals? What kind of commercials could possibly use mutant cannibal humans?

“Matt,” Ines calls. I realize that I’ve been standing in one of the aisles for several minutes, longer than I thought. Ines approaches, carrying a black suit jacket, a white button-up shirt, and dress pants. She holds them up to me, and I’m surprised to see that they’re about my size. She looks around, then reaches back, snatching a bright lavender and purple tie from a rack. Apparently, the color doesn’t work for her, because her brow crinkles and she tosses the tie away, reaching for another. Eventually, she settles on a bright blue tie with dark blue swirls that look a little like elaborate blue flames. With a cheeky grin, she neatly folds the clothes and stuffs them into her bag, which is already a little bloated from the last store.

“Ines…” I start to say before she shushes me.

“I want to see how you look in it once we’re done,” she tells me. She doesn’t wait for me to reply before slinging the bag over her shoulder and heading out to the next store.

We move into the next section, what used to be a massive department store. The light is less here, so we take extra caution where the darkness hinders our view. This is going to be the place where we find what we’re looking for, but because of the looting, things are entirely out of place. Items of lesser quality dot the terrain, tempting us to pick them up and use them for the day they’ll last until they inevitably fall apart. Ines is determined to pick up anything she thinks is fashionable, so I task myself with choosing what both of us will actually need. I find three pairs of socks, two new t-shirts, a thick, denim jacket for Ines, and some sewing materials, including actual needles. I don’t really know what all Ines picks up, but she’s starts hanging the clothes on the straps of her bag when the bag itself gets too full to carry anything else.

After a while, I spot something I know for certain will be needed. Ines watches me as I head over to it, and she smirks.

“Better make a careful choice,” she says behind me as I approach the pile of underwear, which is taller than I am. There is something here for everyone, and some of it is in packages, some of it out and about. I survey the stack carefully before reaching in, and then I look back at Ines.

“So…” she grins, crossing her arms and giving me a sassy look. “Boxers or briefs?”

I give it right back. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

She giggles, then begins to inspect the pile with her flashlight.

“Are you gonna take care of yourself on this one?” I call.

“I was going to help you,” she calls back. I smile and shake my head.

“Thanks, I think I got this,” I tell her. “Worry about your own unmentionables.”

“Aw, but you need to know how to shop for a woman, remember?”

“You know, somehow, I don’t think it’s really *that* important…”

As I’m speaking, I tug at a pair of boxer-shorts I suspect may fit me and also be clean, but as I do I feel the extra weight right as I see what that weight is. The shape explodes out of the pile and I swing my sword, missing it entirely. As I fall back, reaching for my gun, my heart recedes back into my chest and I glare at the squirrel, which scurries away, chattering its teeth as it goes. The nuts it had gathered for the winter spill out onto the grimy tiles.

I look over at Ines, who is staring at me with wide eyes, her Taser armed and ready to fire. I reach down, pick up the boxer-shorts and the nuts they were meant to contain, and I grin.

“Well, I guess that’s what they’re for…” I say with a shrug.

Ines sighs, mutters something in French, and moves on. Before I even ask, she tells me she got what she needed from the pile, so I choose to keep my mouth shut.

I’m stuffing the newfound linen in my backpack when I nearly trip over something on the floor. I go to kick it out of the way, but I stop when I see what it is.

“Woah!” I yelp, skipping out of the way to avoid it. Ines approaches cautiously, stopping when I hold out my hand.

“What is it?” she asks me. I motion for her to come over as I carefully step back with gentle steps. When she sees what I see, her eyes widen and she freezes. Sitting in a large hole in the floor, sticking up just enough to be a tripping hazard, is a pile of several bundles of old dynamite, wrapped in several layers of black fuse cord. I aim my flashlight at the pile, which clearly extends further beneath the tiled floor.

“Someone put this here,” Ines says with a mixture of awe and horror. “Why?”

“Dunno,” I say, slowly kneeling to get a better look at the stuff. “Could be to hide it and come back for it.”

Ines and I look at each other, and she swings her light around, watching in all directions for anything suspicious.

“Does it - will it - is it…dangerous…?” Ines asks breathlessly, not wanting to move too quickly.

“…not sure yet…” I mumble, scooting closer. Deep down, in a place I don’t want to admit, I know there’s really only one way to find out.

“Back up,” I say to her. She just stares at me, like she’s waiting for me to smile and laugh at the joke I made. I give her an insistent look and motion her to move away, and she bites her lip and takes a few slow steps back. I move an inch at a time until I’m right over the stuff, within arm’s reach, and Ines puts her hands on her head when I stretch out my hands.

“Ohhhhhhhhh…Matt…” she moans nervously.

“Shine your light,” I say to her. “I need light.”

I stick my flashlight in between my teeth and gingerly unwrap the loose end of the fuse cord from the top bundle, freeing it. As I move, I remorsefully remember a documentary I happened to watch about dynamite years ago, which detailed the use of the stuff after its inception into American culture and industry. I know that the oldest form of dynamite would start to sweat (kind of like I am at this moment), forming pools of the sensitive nitroglycerin and becoming susceptible to exploding when jostled. The higher the percentage of nitroglycerin used, the more dangerous the dynamite is. I can’t imagine that this particular collection of high explosives is newly made, unless there’s a bomb-maker running around these parts I don’t know about. I suppose it’s not too impossible, but I haven’t heard any explosions since I started on my journey, so I’m not taking any chances.

After placing the bundle slowly on the floor, I use my pocket knife to gingerly snip the strings holding the bundle together, then lift one of the sticks out and shine my light onto it. The bold letters on the brown paper wrapping are printed in black:

**DYNAMITE, MILITARY M1**

**(Medium Velocity)**

**DANGER**

I sigh and sit back, holding up the stick. Ines takes a breath with me, just as relieved.

“We’re good,” I tell her. “It’s military explosive.”

Ines’s panic returns and she backs up again. “It’s real?”

“Yeah, but they don’t make military-grade dynamite with nitroglycerin, so it doesn’t degrade when it gets old. It’s safe - I mean, as long as we don’t beat on it or shoot it…or, you know, light the fuse…”

I hold out the stick to her, and she cautiously approaches me and takes it. I pull up some of the other tiles, and I’m amazed at how much is here (the sheer amount of it causes some of my apprehension to return).

“What do they use instead?” she asks me.

I shrug. “I don’t remember. I just know it won’t blow our heads off if we’re not around after we light the fuse.”

My mention of it causes me to look down at the large amount of fuse cord. It’s black, so it’s timed, probably at one minute for every thirty centimeters of cord, and there has to be several dozen yards of cord in here, enough to stretch from here to the mall entrance.

“Somebody might have been planning to set a trap with this stuff…” I muse. “Guess they never got the chance.”

“I hope they’re dead,” Ines grumbles.

“Oh, wow…that’s nice,” I remark, standing.

“Are we taking this with us?” she asks, and I notice a disparaging hint to her tone.

“Hmmmm,” I hum, cocking my head at her. “Not your cup of tea?”

She wrinkles her nose at me. “*French*, not *British*,” she retorts.

“What, there’s no tea anywhere in France?”

Ines sets the stick of dynamite down and doesn’t answer me, preferring instead to strut away and force me to follow to keep up. I look back at the pile, barely hidden in the floor except for that one unpacked bundle, and I make a mental note of where it is, right next to the giant pile of underwear (not hard to spot). It isn’t quite a full-fledged premonition, but I can’t help but suspect that the dynamite might come in handy soon.

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Eventually, we come to the end of the department store, which opens up to another set of walkways and side stores like before. I peer over the railing of the second floor and I see something down in the middle, at the crossway of the first-floor paths. It’s an enormous, circular mall fountain, bone-dry.

“What’s that?” Ines asks, pointing down at it.

I’m about to sarcastically ask whether or not they have water fountains in France, but then my eye catches something else. I squint to make sure I’m right, but I can’t tell from here.

“C’mon,” I say, racing around the side toward the stairs. I nearly trip while descending them, reminding myself that no excitement is worth losing my life due to a stupid accident (or by stumbling into a group of mutants or something else).

My forced caution is rewarded when we reach the fountain. I see the tiles that have been upended, leading from the base of the fountain to a rectangular section over on the wall. A cord goes from the fountain along the ground underneath the overturned tiles, connecting it to a large bank of solar panels. The shattered skylight above us is shining directly on it.

“This thing has power!” I exclaim.

Ines’s eyes grow wide.

“How do we turn it on?”

I look around, trying to find the solution, but I don’t see it.

“There’s gotta be a switch here somewhere,” I mutter. “We just have to find it.”

I examine the cables leading from underneath the fountain to the wall, tracing them from one end to the other. After a few minutes and repeated back-and-forth searching, I find it on the wall beneath the solar panel, and I kick myself for missing it earlier due to my excitement. I look up from it, calling for Ines, but I don’t see her anywhere.

“Ines?” I call out, sweeping my light at the dark corners. I don’t see her. She was just with me; where did she go? I take a few steps to the right, checking the other side of the fountain. Not there either. She’s not *in* the fountain - where did she go?!

“Ines!” I yell, walking further and peering down the hallway we just came.

She appears out of nowhere, holding up a duffle bag full of something.

“Ines, where did you--?”

She dumps the bag out on the floor and I see a dozen forms of soap; body wash, shampoo, bar soap, etc. tumble out, and she reaches for one right away.

“I can’t believe we have soap!” she giggles.

“Where did you go?” I ask, happy but also miffed that she left my side, even if it was only for a few minutes.

“I was just around the corner,” she says, waving me off. “But look! I found you some Old Spice! Old Spice for an old king!”

“Oh, really? And what did you get for yourself, Blanch?”

“Why, since I am chaste and holy, I have to have the best,” she tells me conceitedly. “So, I got a few…this one has shea butter, this one has jasmine and coconut, and this one moisturizes.”

“Right, so which one are you gonna use?”

“All of them, dummy,” she says with a wink.

“Well, let’s make sure the fountain actually works, first,” I suggest, going over to the panel. Ines gathers up her soaps, and I hope desperately that she isn’t disappointed as I watch the excitement ooze from her every step.

“Here goes nothing…”

I flip the switch and hear the hum of the pump motor starting to grind away. It goes for a second, then shuts off.

“Try again!” Ines calls.

I try once more, and this time the pump runs for longer, but still shuts off.

“Again!” Ines calls more loudly.

Again, I try it, and the same result. The pump runs for longer with the grinding noise, but doesn’t keep going. Still, at the end, I hear Ines squeal.

“I hear it! The water is in there! Again!”

“Ines, I don’t think--”

“AGAIN!”

I flip the switch once more, leaving the panel to walk over to where Ines is standing, biting her lip anxiously for the second time today. I’m not going to enjoy the look of shattered hope on her face when it doesn’t work like all the times before.

Then, I hear it. The gurgling noise that sinks make after they’ve had the water turned off for several hours. Ines meets my eyes and smiles broadly at the shock she must see on my face, and then the motor shuts off, leaving us in silence.

We look at each other.

“Again!” we both gasp together. She runs over to the panel and I jump up into the fountain bed, climbing to the top so that I can see the hole where the water should be emerging soon, and I see what must be a big part of the problem. The hole is clogged with dirt and debris. It appears a small bush is attempting to sprout out of it. With my knife, I frantically start to dig it out as Ines starts the pump up again. I feel the vibration of the gurgling beneath the fountain as the pump hums to life, stronger than ever. I grab the baby bush by its roots and yank, and water explodes outward right in my face.

I hear Ines scream with delight as I tumble down into the fountain bed, feeling the chilly water rain down on top of me. I scramble out of the fountain, pulling off my katana from over my shoulder, my belt with my gun and short sword and tools on it, my trench coat and hoodie. Ines races past me, tossing the bag with the soaps in it into the fountain bed, which has slowly but surely begun to fill with water. She turns back and looks at me and laughs, and then I taste the disgusting flavor on my tongue. That initial outburst of water, I realize, was that nasty, brown gunk that first comes out of old, dirty pipes. But, as I look at the clear, crisp water showering down from the fountain, I realize that I’m about to wash all my troubles away, and I start to giggle.

“Oh, man! I don’t believe it!”

“Shut your mouth and get in!” Ines demands, reaching down to pull my boots off. She gets one of them untied and off my foot but can’t make the other one come off, and so she simply drags me across the floor by my boot over to the edge of the fountain. She pulls off her own jacket, boots, and cargo pants, stripping down to her t-shirt and underwear, then jumps right in, letting out a delighted yelp as the cold water washes over her. I follow her lead and then dive in myself, only for her to grab one of the bottles of body wash and begin to squeeze it onto me in large globs, starting with my face.

“Let’s see if you can be less ugly,” she giggles, her accent coming through heavily.

“Ladies first.” I grab two of the bottles she was bragging about earlier and return the favor. She squeals again (I don’t think it’s possible for me to ever get tired of that sound), and suddenly stops, looking at me with amazement.

“I can’t believe this is happening!” she cries, leaping forward and wrapping her arms around me, laughing uncontrollably. I hold her tightly and lift her off her feet, swinging her around and splashing water everywhere. She rubs her hands on the top of my head, creating suds with the soap that obscure my vision. I grab some and throw them at her, and she skips back, slipping as she does. I reach out and catch her arms to keep her from falling, and she ends up tipping the other way, falling into me, still laughing.

The next thing I know, we’re in each other’s faces, and her lips are locked onto mine. The warm, wet, soapy taste of her tongue lasts for what seems like hours, but really is only an instant. She pulls back, still holding onto my shoulders, appearing as shocked as I am. We’re still inches apart, and we stare at one another. For a second, only for a second, I contemplate kissing her again, and I suspect that she is thinking the same thing. Just then, I realize something that I’ve known all along, but now I know differently. She isn’t the gaunt, emaciated woman I found lying on the bed, waiting to die; she’s fully recovered her strength and her shape. Her limbs have filled out and the curves of her form have returned, not just hanging from her bones like before. Her lips no longer stretch over her teeth; instead, they’re full and pink, tender when she sleeps and curvaceous when she smiles. Her stringy hair has turned into an auburn curtain. This is Ines. How did I not see this before? What am I going to do now that I notice?

We look at each other, our eyes different now, and her touch on my shoulders is gentler now, like she’s halfway between pulling closer and letting go. We pant, and my feet shuffle, shifting my balance. I look down at the water filling up the fountain and the bubbles from the soap collecting around our legs. I try to say something, but there’s a frog in my throat and I have to clear it. Ines does it, too, and the moment is over.

She reaches up and wipes the suds off my hair and face, then steps back and puts her hands on her hips, biting her tongue and not making eye contact.

I decide to try to move on like it didn’t happen. Briefly, I stick my head into the fountain, washing away the soap, then, once my heart has resumed a normal rhythm, I step over the edge of the fountain.

“I’ll…I’ll, uh…go get our clothes ready,” I say to her, my own voice sounding strange to me. “You go ahead and…finish up…and then we’ll switch. Sound good?”

She nods, sitting on the side of the fountain, lathering her soapy hair with her fingers over one shoulder.

“Good idea…” she says, forcing herself to project optimism. “I can call you when I’m done.”

As I walk away, I hear her pull off her wet shirt, and I fight the temptation to turn my head and peek. I grit my teeth and walk away, incredulous of my own thoughts.

*“Crap…”* I think to myself. *“Now what?”*