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Hope

The best thing about the world I now live in used to be the fact that I had absolutely no obligations to anyone but myself. I consciously weighed the loss of this when I picked Ines up from the bed against her will and nursed her back to health. I knew it would mean that I’m less independent, less free. I have more to risk, more to lose, more potential pain than just the usual physical kind. The physical kind was always the less painful of the two for me, which is why sometimes it’s easier to simply avoid getting attached. It’s a self-preservation instinct, one that’s helped me stay alive for quite some time on my own. I avoided any attachments to anyone or anything, and it was pretty simple. Plus, there was hardly anyone around to attach to, save for the occasional encounter with (mostly) living people, so I didn’t really have much of a choice most of the time. I purposefully avoided any pets - there was a dog once that tried to befriend me and hang around, but I didn’t want to take the chance. I told myself it was because I didn’t want to risk having it bark or whine or do anything that might give me away if I was trying to sneak around, and that I couldn’t afford to feed both it and myself, and all of that was true to an extent. But ultimately, I knew deep down, in that place that none of us want to admit exists but can’t escape from, that I was haunted by all those terrible scenes from *Where the Red Fern Grows,* and I didn’t care to face that on top of everything else. That’s why I chased it away with a lit branch from my fire.

Now, I feel like I’ve swung completely the other way. I’ve become willfully, maybe irrevocably, attached to Ines. She’s not a pet - she’s another human being, which carries far more meaning with it than anything else possibly could. I care more about her at this moment than I’ve ever cared about any other thing. In my gut, I feel - I *know* - that that’s a bad thing, or at least a huge risk, but I find that it doesn’t matter to me. Not anymore.

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She’s still fast asleep when I wake up. I carefully extricate myself from our intimate tangle so as not to disturb her, stretching myself out when I get to my feet. Looking around, I notice that our water bottles are both empty, so I set them off to the side together to remind myself to fill them.

It doesn’t take me long to change into my regular clothes. The restriction of the khakis and dress shirt is gladly thrown off in favor of my heavy cargo pants and thick trench coat. It feels strange to push my legs and arms through the weighted clothes, and the process is very foreign to me. It’s been a while since I’ve actually changed my outfit, like putting on new skin and a new face.

When my dense apparel rests confidently on my lean shoulders, I grab my belt and secure it around my waist, adjusting it so that everything is in the proper spot. I run my hand across it with my eyes closed to be sure that all of it is where I left it last. Snatching up my short sword and the two water bottles, I head out toward the fountain.

This area looks different in the morning light, but I’m still able to spot the landmarks I committed to memory: the remnants of the chainsaw, the multicolored grime spot on the tile, an old wheel attached to half of an axel pointing up at the ceiling. The fountain is a five-minute walk from our shelter, and it’s still running when I arrive. The soapy water has mostly filtered out of the main section, but I don’t want to have to drink Old Spice water for the next several days. I also remember that our bathing water source can’t be the same as our drinking water, so this is going to have to be the only time I do this. I fill the bottles up with the water sprinkling down from above and turn to head back.

A beam of sunlight, coming in from a far-off side window, pierces through the veil of clouds and nearly blinds me. I hear birds chirping inside the mall, and I’m a little surprised at all the green that’s illuminated just now. I stand back, close my eyes, and take in a deep breath. The scent of fresh morning dew fills my nostrils; the scampering of tiny rodent claws on the floor a few hallways over reaches my ears. If there are going to be any deer around here (a strong possibility, now that I think about it), this might become something of a pretty nice hideaway.

I pick up something out of place when I open my eyes again. Off to the left, through the doors of what used to be a shoe store, the sunlight hits something colored bright orange, a color that matches nothing else in this overgrown relic of humanity. I look around, stow the water bottles someplace safe, pull my short sword from its sheath, and creep forward to investigate.

But for the sun shining into the store, I wouldn’t be able to see anything. My flashlight helps me navigate the obstacles in my way - overturned shelves, piles of empty shoeboxes, and the like - and it’s right away that I can identify the source of the strange color. It’s a large poster, made of thick, cardboard-like paper, nailed to the wall rather haphazardly, and it is obviously much newer than anything else inside this dilapidated space. Climbing over the rotting remains of an old shelf, I can see that the orange is marked up with thick, black lines.

After a moment, I recognize them as words. I have to stop in my tracks, my mouth dropping open. I feel the sword leave my fingers and hear it clatter to the floor, quickly picking it back up and scrambling to get closer to the sign that’s been nailed to the back wall. Its bold letters leap off the orange sheet at me, screaming their message loud and clear:

**Ashborne – City of Survivors**

**Food! Shelter! Safety!**

**All are welcome**

**156 mi – follow the sun west**

I’m hyperventilating, and the palms of my hands are cold and clammy.

“No freakin’ way!” I exclaim, realizing that I’m out of breath. My heart is beating a million miles a minute. I fall over trying to back away, unable to take my eyes off the orange cardboard sign. It may very well be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life.

I race back toward our sleeping spot, trying to process what I’ve just seen. Halfway back, I have to stop and turn around, returning to the sign to make sure I saw what I actually saw. My doubt seizes me momentarily as in my excitement I forget exactly where the sign is at first. A small cry escapes my throat at the thought of it just being a mirage, but then becomes a low giggle when I finally spot it.

Running back to where I left Ines, my mind can hardly imagine the possibility. No more digging through rubble for basic nutrition! No more spending the night under a strange roof or in the dirt or rain! No more living at the mercy of predatory cannibals and their alpha males! This is a chance at some semblance of a normal life. My body tingles at the concept of a hot shower.

I hardly realize how hard I’m breathing as I enter our area. Eyes wide, I see she’s not there, but a trail of her clothes from last night leads to the back where she changed yesterday after her bath.

“Matt?” she calls.

“Yeah,” I answer. “Hurry up. I got something to show you.”

“Almost done,” she says. “Did you take my water bottle?”

Crap. I forgot the water bottles back by the fountain.

“Yeah,” I say again. “Be right back.”

I turn around and run back to the fountain, having to look in different directions to get my bearings and remember where I left them. My mind is still swimming with visions of Ashborne – for a moment, I forget that I’m looking for water bottles and find myself searching for that orange sign again. After what is entirely too long to be reasonable, I remember why I came back out here and march toward the bottles. I stuck them behind the remains of a fake potted plant, lined up to be hidden just behind it.

However, when I move it, my stomach flutters. They’re turned on their sides, the water spilled out all over the floor. They’ve been opened, their screw tops removed and placed side-by-side a few feet away.

I hear something, a noise that sounds like it came from something living, and I whirl around, short sword ready. I hold my breath, and all is still. I can’t tell if the residual noise my ears are hearing is from me or from something else. Is that my coat or something hiding nearby?

I wait a few seconds, then stand up straight and look around. There it is again! It’s up on the second level, a repeating noise like footsteps. The nearest way up is at the other end of the long hall – if anything was up there above me, it’ll be gone by the time I get up there. I’ll have to check it out later.

Ines emerges right as I’m looking up.

“What is it?”

Pausing, I hold out a hand to shush her and listen for any remaining noise. Nothing.

"What did you see?" she whispers after I relax.

"I think...I think we might not be alone here," I tell her.

I hear the leather strap on her holster snap open and notice the tip of her Taser as she points it around, shining her light onto the darker corners. She's quiet for a little longer, then sighs.

"We can't leave yet," she expresses. "This place is too good."

"Well..." I murmur. "What if there's a better place?"

She gives me a double-take, her brow crinkling.

"Huh?"

We pick up our water bottles and I beckon for her to follow, leading her back past the fountain and toward the sign in the back of the shoe store. The closer I get, the more I feel my heart racing. I can't wait to see the look on her face when she reads it.

The two of us stumble over the rubble; I'm a lot clumsier than usual, and Ines remarks that I'm making her nervous. But then I point, and she sees them, the black words etched into my mind's eye forever. Even though I've already spent plenty of time today gazing at them, I can't help but gaze a little more. When I look to my right, Ines is sitting on the floor, hands over her mouth. The crooked path of a tear stains her cheek.

It only takes a second for her to regain her composure, but then she stands up straight. She's a rugged, slender beauty in the new cargo pants and the rest of the outdoorsy-style clothes that barely hide her pleasant shape.

"When do we leave?" she asks.

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We need more food. If we want to get to Ashborne, we’re going to take a few days to do it. We need to feed ourselves somehow, and I vote for meat. We’ll spend the rest of today searching the mall for anything edible we can take with us – plus, I want something to shoot with my bow. Feeling especially energetic, I take a practice shot at an old, rotten branch laying nearby, forgetting to warn Ines beforehand, and I get a stern reprimand from her about how dangerous I can be when I’m not careful.

While I’m happy that I hit my target, Ines is right. I can’t let my giddy excitement at the concept of Ashborne cause me to forget the reality of where we still are. There’s likely a mischievous cannibal in the area, or possibly some other creature my mind can’t conceive of stalking the halls. The worst-case scenario would be if we were on our way to a place where we could start to live a normal life again, but were killed on the way because of my recklessness.

We head out, leaving our extra valuables in the safe room, Ines stopping to carefully inspect the contents of her haversack. She makes a face, and I ask what she’s thinking.

“We should look for batteries, too,” she says, holding up the pairs of two-way radios we appropriated from the police station.

“Oh, yeah,” I remark, taking one from her and looking at it. “I totally forgot we had these.”

She looks like she wants to say something, but pauses, looking at me with dubious eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"If we got these working, we could split up sometimes and gather more that way," she suggests.

She speaks carefully and slowly, knowing that it's a risky idea even in broad daylight. I stare at her, trying to search the recesses of my survival knowledge for any situation where it might be appropriate to split up. It seems like that's one of those risks that we don't need to be taking right now, but with the constant communication between us, and as long as we stay a certain distance apart...maybe? What if we *could* get more done that way?

"Maybe," I say after giving it some thought. She nods and puts the radios back into her bag. I start thinking logically – it takes time to prepare food, mend clothes, set up camp, and all the other things needed to make our campsites livable. If I could scavenge while she sets up the safe spaces, it would save time. I wouldn’t have to spend the time doing that, and she wouldn’t have to be at risk. I consider how chauvinistic that sounds, but I’m far more suited to be out and about since I’m willing to use deadly force, and also since I’m stronger, faster, braver, better, etc.

“What are you so smiley about?” she inquires derisively.

“Nothing,” I say with a shrug. “Just that I’m better than you.”

She gives me a blank stare.

I add, “In just about every single way.”

She slaps me several times, spitting words in French.

“You’ll learn your lesson one day, *Your Majesty*,” she mocks.

As we search, we calculate the time it will take us to walk to Ashborne from where we are. The sign said that if we go east, we will have one hundred, fifty-six miles to travel. We can cover about thirty-five miles per day if we really focus on it, which will have us there in just over four and a half days.

After so long living this nomadic life, we can finally reclaim a little of our lives before.

And it will only take a few days!

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Amazingly, we get the radios working. Well, more accurately, *Ines* gets them working. They had batteries in them already (ones that shockingly weren’t leaking acid), so it was a simple matter of finding a common frequency. As we walk, Ines is explaining the concept of VHF to me, and for some reason my mind keeps floating back to those old, bulky tapes I used to watch Disney movies on as a kid, the ones that said “Bee kind – Rewind” on them, with the image of the happy, buzzing little insect reminding me in the most annoying way to be courteous to others.

We haven’t found much in the way of food. A makeshift river is flowing down a stairway at the far end of the mall. We find a big plastic jug in a nearby smoothie cart, and we decide to collect what water we can for the trip in case we can’t find anything for a while. The water runs through a gutter down the middle of the mall aisle, previously covered by a grate but now open. The falls cascading down from a giant hole in the ceiling are coming from places unknown, but they’re flowing intensely enough that we almost lose the jug when we dip it in. It’s going to be heavy carrying this in my backpack, but it’s a necessity for the trip. Still, I keep my eye out for anything we could potentially use to make transporting our gear easier.

We’ll have to search the other side of the mall tomorrow. We’ve mostly been over the half or third of it that we came through upon entering two days ago, so in the morning, we’ll scavenge deeper into the bowels of the ghost mall. Ines fiddles with the radios as we return to our safe space (which protects us from more than a few hurt feelings), and I can tell she’s trying to get me to see the merits of being able to split up when necessary. I still don’t like the idea, but I’m starting to see the potential use for it.

We turn the corner and see a brown shape moving among the piles of fancy dress clothes and empty soap bottles. She’s rooting around in them, apparently so fascinated with them that she doesn’t even hear our boisterous approach. When we see her, we freeze, and I instinctively reach for my short sword. She whirls to face us, a look of shock that I could have sworn was almost human in origin plaster all over her face. The brown and dark-red stains confirm my original suspicion.

It’s Scar-Face’s female, Bloody Mary.