18

Hospitality

She sees us and flinches, scrambling to get up and turn around, snarling and baring her teeth. Her yell sounds angry and afraid – she didn’t expect to see us here.

We can’t let her give our position away or draw more unwanted attention. Her eyes dart to the exit from this room and she moves as if to flee, but my katana is out in a flash. I’m only going to get one shot at this, and I’d better make it count.

She’s nimble, agile, fast. Her jump carries her over to the wall, where she leaps off and lands behind me, even with my counter movements. I swing, but she crouches down and my swing misses. Ines is moving, too, and I see her angle to get between Bloody Mary and the wide, open exit.

I lunge forward, but the she-creature falls back as well and scrambles to get out of the way. She turns, evading another of my swings, and sees Ines waiting for her, her hand on her belt. I reach for my gun, but the idea of firing off a round and drawing the attention of any other monster in the mall makes me think twice. Still, if we can’t contain Bloody Mary…

“Ines, get back,” I call, pulling out my 9mm.

“Wait!” she says, deep in concentration. Bloody Mary snarls at her, then leaps. I aim, but Ines draws first. A pop sounds off, not nearly as loud as I thought, and then I realize by Mary’s convulsions and twitches that Ines has hit her with the stun gun. The probes stick out of her midsection, and Ines makes sure to keep her finger on the trigger. I’m a little surprised by how effective it is against the mutant since they’re so much stronger than average humans, but there she lies, squirming stiffly.

I flip my sword into a reverse grip and approach, looking at the spot on her neck where a wound will kill the quickest.

“Keep her steady,” I say, aiming the blade.

“No, tie her up!” Ines insists.

My glare must be intense, because Ines shrinks back a little as I look at her.

“Ines, I swear to God…”

“Please!” she begs. “You said we wouldn’t if we don’t have to.”

I stare at her, remembering my promise from earlier.

“She didn’t exactly attack us,” Ines continues.

“Because that’s suicide,” I argue. “Ines, this is ridiculous.”

“Just…please!” Ines begs even more earnestly. “I know, it doesn’t make any sense. Just please, tie her up!”

She lets Bloody Mary have a reprieve from the electric shocks, and the mutant gasps, lying face-down, moaning and sucking in labored breaths as I stare at her shriveled form. The last time I saw her, she was running away from me, abandoning their scar-faced leader with old One-Eye. What if she’s been cast out? Maybe she’s on her own now, and it will be easy to condition her to rely on us as pack-mates.

Or maybe she’s been tracking us this whole time, waiting for a vulnerable moment to pounce and score a week’s worth of meat from us. Who’s to say? Is sparing a cannibal’s life worth the risk of our own? I’m skeptical at best, but Ines apparently thinks so.

I drive my sword into the floor with a ring that makes Bloody Mary flinch again. Putting my backpack on the ground and reaching into it, I pull out the rag bandages and the extension cord.

“This is stupid,” I mutter, approaching the prone mutant. She starts to move again, but Ines squeezes the trigger, the snap-snap-snap of the stun gun accompanying the creature’s spasms. She squeals again as I place my boot on the side of her head, holding her down while I wrestle her arms behind her back and tightly bind them together with the extension cord.

“Don’t be so rough,” Ines complains.

“Shut-up,” I say sternly. I’ve had enough of her trying to coddle this flesh-eating monster. "She’s lucky I’m listening to you instead of putting a bullet in her head.”

She’s probably glaring at me, but I’m not concerned about that right now. Bloody Mary shrieks again, and this time I grab the rags and tie them together to form a gag. As I turn her head to the side, she snaps at me with her mouth full of shark-shaped teeth, and I almost say goodbye to one or two of my fingers. I’m sitting on top of her, straddling her wiry, lanky form, attempting to reach down and grab her head without getting a chunk taken out of my hand. It’s like trying to wrestle an alligator. I look up at Ines.

“Little help, here?” I ask. Yep, she’s glaring at me.

I reach for my gun again. “Or I could just do it my way.”

Ines squeezes the trigger again and I feel the taught muscles of the animal underneath me tighten up all throughout her body. While she’s twitching, her mouth open, a croaking yell escaping, I slip the gag in and tie it tightly behind her head. When I’m done, I stand and let her up. She rolls onto her knees, snarling behind the gag, biting down as if she’s trying to chew through it. It won’t work – I made sure it’s too thick for that. She struggles to her feet as Ines and I take a step back, and her next move is predictable. She tries to run out the door. When she reaches the end of the cord, she jerks to a stop, looking at the orange cable in wonderment. It snakes across the floor to a support column near where I’m standing, holding the loose end, keeping my foot on the knot tied around the thick pillar.

When she sees, her shoulders slump in proper misery. I hear a mournful note through the gag and see the creased brow of confusion and helplessness. It’s about time I saw some genuine grief from one of these beasts. Still, the important question remains.

“Great,” I mutter. “Now what do we do with her?”

Ines doesn’t reply at first. She must not have thought this through. Figures.

“We let her go when we leave,” she tells me finally.

“You’re joking,” I sigh. “You *have* to be joking.”

“We’ll be in Ashborne soon, and we won’t have to worry about it,” she tries.

“But we have to *get there* first, and we don’t know if we’ll be leading them right to the town!”

“We can knock her out before we go,” Ines says.

“Or…we could just *shoot* her NOW and get it over with,” I suggest with condescension dripping from every word.

“Matt…” Ines mumbles despondently.

I look over again at Bloody Mary. She’s watching us with the utmost caution, sitting with her legs sticking out to the right. Ines walks over to her, and Bloody Mary’s eyes narrow as she tries to scoot away, only to be stopped by the cord. Ines kneels down and speaks in a soft, gentle voice.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” she promises.

“Speak for yourself,” I mutter.

Ines ignores me. Bloody Mary’s nostrils flare as Ines talks.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Ines tries to tell her.

The mutant doesn’t listen. She growls ferociously like a rabid dog, drool coming from behind the rag. I flash back to the moment when I realized what Scar-Face wanted with Ines, that revolting awareness, and how Bloody Mary saw Ines as her replacement. It’s ironic – because Scar-Face views me as his rival, Bloody Mary sees Ines as something quite similar.

And she absolutely hates her for it.

She lashes forward, smacking her head against Ines’s, who screams and falls over. My protective instincts kick in and I’m standing over Bloody Mary in the next moment, having slapped her across the face with the back of my hand. I see the look in her eyes, and I see that she’s as shocked at my actions as I am. Obviously, my blow doesn’t have the force behind it that someone like Scar-Face could muster, but it has the same impact. She cowers before me, her head positioned low, her shoulders hunched up. Her demeanor is everything of a dog who knows she’s been bad.

“Don’t touch her again!” I command, jabbing a finger at her. She hums, a submissive sound, lowering her head more and more to placate my harshness. I turn and see Ines rubbing her forehead.

“She doesn’t seem too grateful,” I posit.

Ines comes to stand next to me. Bloody Mary snarls at her from behind the gag again, but then seems to remember I’m still there and stops with the noisemaking. Her shoulders sag and she looks around, as if trying to occupy herself with something else other than her current deplorable situation. At that moment, she looks more human than any of them ever have before. I can’t stand it.

“See if you can put some clothes on her,” I say.

“She’ll fight me the whole time,” Ines contends, knowing she’s stating the obvious.

“Yeah, well…” I start, unable to come up with a suitable counterargument. “I just don’t like looking at these nude things. If you’re gonna insist on keeping her around, she’s gotta be covered.”

“If it makes you feel any better, remember how much you believe they’re not human,” Ines suggests mockingly.

I force myself to look at the female creature’s blood- and dirt-covered form, an uncontrolled grimace breaking out across my face.

“…It doesn't…”

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I know she doesn't want it, but I leave my .22 with Ines when I begin my next foraging excursion. The moment I told her I was going to do that, I knew it probably wasn't going to happen without some words between us, but I didn't bother to listen to her arguments. I simply held up a hand when she started to talk and left it on the pile of dress clothes near the wall. I put one of the sleeves over it in a particular way, knowing that if I find it in some other fashion, Ines will have used it even if she doesn't want me to know she did. I chide myself for my manipulative ways, but my conscience doesn't receive any real attempt at an apology.

A warm breeze blows over me as I make my way back to where I heard that scampering noise from earlier, the noise which (I now assume) was Bloody Mary sneaking around and messing with us. Just the reminder makes me seethe - I still can’t believe Ines talked me into sparing that she-creature's life. For a moment, I pause and check myself. It makes me so mad to think that I didn't pump a few rounds into her skull, but why? What are the reasons I could be so angry that something is alive instead of dead, regardless of what species it is?

My introspection is interrupted when I see a large mass lying on the floor inside one of the old storefronts. By now, I'm a ten-minute walk from our safe space, so everything here is new and carries the equal potential for danger or usefulness. The shape of it seems to imply the latter from where I'm standing.

A crackle startles me when I step into the old department storefront, and I whirl around before realizing a second later that it was me as I stepped on some broken glass. I pause to listen, but hear only the wind passing through the hole in the ceiling somewhere behind me and the drip-drip-drip as water leaks in.

Continuing forward, my pace quickens and I take in a sharp breath when I realize what the object is. I exclaim quietly, kneeling down to grab the handles of the motorbike and lift it off the floor. It’s not very heavy, much lighter than an actual motorcycle – it’s one of those motocross dirt bikes, basically just a regular bike with a motor on it (and some other modifications, obviously). It seems to be mostly intact, except for the broken high-impact plastic on the front and the chunks missing from the foam seat. Fortunately, someone installed some kind of light on the front of it above the shattered plastic, and it doesn’t appear to be broken, though it is cracked on the side. A few of the spokes are bent, and the chain hangs lazily out of one side, all twisted up with the back wheel. Leaning down, I check the fuel tank, and it doesn’t appear to be ruptured in any way. That’s a good sign.

I stand up and assess my options. This will make a lot of noise if it gets into working order, and there’s not a lot of room to carry anything on it, much less two people packing a lot of gear. Although, we wouldn’t need a whole lot since this would turn a four-day journey into a four-hour journey (assuming we aren’t stopped along the way). At most, I’m guessing it wouldn’t take us more than half a day to reach Ashborne. And since these bikes can be ridiculously fuel-efficient, it won’t take more than a few gallons to get us there.

At first, the previous owner of the bike is nowhere to be found. Then I discover the remnants of riding gear, which contain the remnants of the rider. I tug at the gear, but it’s covered in blood and decaying corpse, and so I leave it where it is for now. Then, I rethink it, realizing what a big help some lightweight armor would be out here. If I’d had that on during my fight in the basement…I reach up and feel the reminders of that brawl, imagining how much better I would have fared if I had had more protection from the mouth of that mutant on my arm than just my coat. If Ines can get this bike working and I can get this riding gear into wearable condition, we’ll be set. Although I’d almost rather Ines wear the gear while we ride in case we crash, if only to make myself feel better (even if she is too lax with our “friends”).

The thought of her makes me smile, though not as much as I would have smiled before we captured Bloody Mary. Still, I press it aside – we won’t have to worry about this once we get to Ashborne. I’m sure they have their own procedure for dealing with these beasts there, and it must be reasonable if they’ve survived this long.

Suddenly, I feel fear gripping my heart in the form of something I hadn’t considered before. What if Ashborne isn’t there? What if it started up, but they moved, or they were overrun? What if it’s not the safe haven we think it is? The only evidence to the contrary is the newness of the sign, and if that’s all I have, then…

…then it has to be enough. I can’t let anything stop me from seeing this through. If it’s not what we hoped for, at least it’s something to strive for until we discover otherwise. I’ll hope for the best, but we should still plan to bring food and water with us in case things don’t go well.

I gather up all the pieces I can see lying in the immediate area, even the ones that seem broken beyond repair, and stuff them in my backpack. Once I’m sure it’s all in there, I set to the grim task of removing the gray and black riding gear from the corpse. It’s a full upper-body set (with some scratches on the hardened plastic and minor tears in the fabric that holds it together), but the leg guards not present, mostly likely located wherever his actual legs ended up. I elect not to bother looking at the chasm that’s replaced his insides. The helmet is trashed, virtually cracked in half, maybe during the crash that brought the bike in here in the first place. The head it once contained is completely gone, but maybe that’s better than seeing it in whatever condition it would likely be in by now. I’ve learned to take joy in the little things.

After complimenting myself on my positive outlook, I pick the bike up and push it out of the storefront. I have the urge to hop on and try to peddle it like an actual bicycle, but clearly that’s not how it works, so I content myself with trudging back across the deserted landscape to the safe room.

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When I ask Ines if she can fix the motorbike, she immediately inspects it without much comment. After a minute or so, she stands up and sighs.

“I can fix it, but I need a few more parts,” she tells me.

I run over all the places we’ve already been in my head and wonder if we overlooked anything useful for this project.

“Okay,” I say, my sigh equally exhausted. “Write me a list.”

Ines bites her lip.

“What?”

“I…I don’t think I know the names…in English. I should go with you.”

I nod to Bloody Mary, who is seated against a wall, still bound, still watching us suspiciously.

“What about her?”

Ines shrugs. “Leave her here. She’s not going anywhere.”

I look back to the creature, and I notice several pairs of destroyed underwear around her. I chuckle.

“You tried to dress her after all?”

Ines scowls. “It went as expected.”

“Oh, well,” I say, shrugging. “You tried.”

She smiles. “We can leave her here, and if she escapes, then I suppose…”

She pauses, and I eye her warily. I don’t want to suggest something and start a feud right before we set out together for the remainder of the day, not with how tense things are already.

“…well,” she finally continues. “Maybe we can do things your way.”

I look over at Bloody Mary once more, trying to imagine her tantrum at being forced to wear underwear, like a toddler who wants to stay in diapers rather than grow up even a little. I hate her existence just a little bit less.

“Only if we have to,” I promise. Ines smiles and I’m a little surprised when she gives me a soft peck on the cheek. I smile back, and then we set out.