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Thank-You Very Much

It doesn’t take Ines long to find what we need, but according to her, she’ll have to spend at least a day (or longer) to get the bike in working order. Somehow, this entails her managing to convince me to listen to her explain how to hotwire a car, which involves me helping to translate French terminology into English things I sort of know. In any case, we’ll be spending another night here. That means I need to find us some food while she takes everything back to the safe room and starts working on it.

The motorcycle armor makes me feel like a beast. I wish I had a mirror so that I could check out how awesome I look, but I temper it with the knowledge that it only protects my upper body. My back, chest, shoulders, and arms are covered with hard, lightweight, plastic plates held together by a thin, breathable fabric mesh. This would have been nice a few weeks ago.

Before I leave, I spare a glance over at Bloody Mary. She is still gagged, and she hasn’t made any more attempts to escape or fight back. Ines brought her water once before, which she rejected at first until Ines left it in her half of the mess kit. I had to be the one to take the gag out and let her drink it, and she didn’t screech or call out. She just stared at me. The glare on her face has softened just enough to be noticeable. She started to resist when I went to tie the gag back on, but I barked commands at her and she did that same lowering of her eyes and shoulders and head, like a sad puppy, and I gagged her, though not nearly as roughly or tightly this time. She sat back on her haunches, giving what must be her version of a sigh, and I began to think a new thought. What if – just maybe – she can be saved? Or, at least, made to travel with us of her own free will? How much of a monster would she be then? There are moments when she sits a certain way, does something with her stringy, dirty hair, looks at us at just the right angle, where I almost forget what she is. With Ashborne’s hope fresh in my veins, it’s starting to bleed over and give me just the faintest ray of promise for her kind. I’m almost willing to silently admit to myself that Ines may be on to something.

I head out into the mall with my bow and what passes for a quiver attached to it. It takes surprisingly little time to find and bag two rabbits and a raccoon. I check for any signs of rabies in each of them, and, finding none, I bring them back to our safe room area within a couple of hours. On the way back, I make a mental note of what looks like a small camping/outdoors outlet to search tomorrow before we get moving.

When I return, Ines is right in the midst of her work, her plaid jacket tied around her middle, hands greasy with an exfoliating mixture of oil and charcoal-colored dust. She tells me she’ll eat in a little while, and I start to prepare a fire.

I’m about to turn and look back to where I last saw Bloody Mary, but I hear a sniffling breath right behind me. I gasp and reach for my sword when I see her standing within arm’s reach. She grunts and hops back, Ines’s wide eyes watching for threat as well, but all I see is Bloody Mary’s expectant (albeit now nervous) expression. She knows I brought back food.

I spare a glance at Ines.

“Hungry,” I venture.

“We don’t know how long it’s been since she has eaten,” she points out.

Bloody Mary takes a few careful steps in my direction, and I examine my catch. Does her kind eat more than just…us? The question alone is enough to make me realize how far from human she really is. I’ve never seen them eat anything besides homo sapien flesh, except for that time I watched them devour one of their own in a feeding frenzy.

“Well, one of these was supposed to be for later, but I guess we could see,” I surmise.

Once the fire is burning, the rabbits are roasting over them, and Bloody Mary is looking rather confused. She clearly doesn’t expect anything right away, probably because there is some kind of pecking order with the cannibals, but she does seem to wonder why neither I nor Ines has eaten anything yet. After another half-hour or so, Ines puts her work on the bike aside and sits down at the fire near me. Bloody Mary is keeping her distance – the fire makes her nervous. I think back to all of my encounters and sightings of the mutants, and I can’t remember a single time I saw any of them use or tolerate the presence of fire, except in the police station with Scar-Face. They act around it like…well, like animals do.

“How’s it coming?” I ask.

“Getting there,” Ines tells me. She starts to describe the details of her work to me, but I hold up a hand and stop her.

“I won’t understand it anyway,” I inform her. “How long till you’re done?”

“If I’m diligent, I can have it working by the afternoon tomorrow,” she says.

“Good. That means we can be gone before tomorrow night.”

Ines smiles a cheeky smile. “You don’t like our hotel room?”

I laugh and check the rabbits again. One of them is almost done. I look back over at Bloody Mary and reach for it. She scampers forward, not too quickly, but eagerly. I reach over slowly, and she lets me remove her gag.

“Alright, then,” I say, squatting down and pulling off a piece of finished meat. “Let’s see how this goes…”

She approaches and I hold out the fire-roasted flank, a piece no larger than my pointer finger. She reaches for it, gingerly touching the hot, tender substance, then sniffs it. She licks it a few times, and I see a slow frown forming across her brow. Her disappointment is so very human. She tosses it away and gives a whiny hiss, bearing her pointy, sharp teeth at us.

“Looks like a no-go,” I mutter, eating a piece myself. Bloody Mary watches me, her face a picture of awed frustration.

“I did not think she would want it,” says Ines.

“Me neither. Let’s see if she’ll eat it raw.”

I grab the raccoon and hack off one of its legs with my Bowie knife, careful not to contaminate my eating hand with its blood. Tossing it to her, I sit back and enjoy my own meal. She picks up the leg and gives it a cursory examination, then takes a gigantic bite. Her joy turns sour when she realizes that it’s not what she thought it was, and she spits it out with a gag of utter disgust, scrutinizing the foul thing much more carefully.

She drops it, stands up, and growls at us. I stand, and she stops.

“Behave, or you die,” I tell her, my hand on the handle of my sword.

“Matt, she’s starving,” Ines says sadly.

“Good,” I reply. “That means she’s not eating someone.”

The she-creature, her mouth still dripping with the blood of her rejected morsel, keeps her glowering eyes on me as she picks it up and grudgingly contents herself with what she has.

“If she’s good, she gets another leg,” I say. “Then that’s it.”

“Matt—”

“We’re not wasting any more of our own food on her,” I say. “If she wants more, she can find it after we release her when we leave.”

Ines looks down at the fire. I know that contemplative stare, the strong-willed woman with a host of thoughts holding her tongue.

“What?”

She hesitates. “Well…”

“Come on, Ines, spit it out,” I demand as the juicy crunch of raw muscle and tendon being pulled from bone is heard behind me.

“She’s…she’s almost like…”

I sit there, staring at her. I think I know where she’s going with this, but I refuse to believe she is that stupid. I want her to say it out loud before I will think that of her.

“Say it.”

“She’s…kind of a part of our pack now, isn’t she?”

I’m speechless.

“I mean,” she continues. “Don’t you think it’s possible—?”

“—that you’re that stupid?” I finish for her. “No, I didn’t, until you said ***that***.”

“I *knew* you were going to say that! I *knew* it! Why do you have to be like this?”

“Ines, this is absolutely the dumbest idea you have ever had in your entire life!” I hiss.

“Are you sure?” she asks, an eyebrow expressing a thousand words worth of feeling. “Know me that well, do you?”

“There cannot *possibly* be any idea you have *ever* had that could be as ridiculous as this one,” I insist.

“I give up,” she says, throwing her hands up in the air. She spits out a series of words about me in French, which I assume are profanities until she translates.

“You’re hopeless. Hopeless! I don’t know why I even bother!”

“Ines, we have had this conversation already,” I remind her. “I am trying to keep us alive. It’d be nice if I got some help from you instead of you trying constantly to make it harder.”

“I am trying to do the right thing!” Ines blurts out. “I suppose I should not expect someone like you to understand what that is. You’re so hardened, so…*modifiés*.”

She searches for the right equivalent in French.

“You’re…*pollués*…*infecté*?”

“Polluted? Infected?”

“Corrupted! Altered!” she exclaims. “This…this world you have lived in…it has changed you, just like it has changed them!”

“Yeah, it has!” I admit without shame. “And you know why? Look right there!”

I point to Bloody Mary, who is licking the bones of her meager meal, still glaring at me.

“It’s because she would rather be eating US! If she wasn’t tied up, and we didn’t have weapons, she would be eating US instead of a raccoon! If it wasn’t for me and my sword, you’d be a cannibal concubine right now! If that’s not enough, look around you – our whole society is already gone because of them. How far does it have to go before you figure out that they are dangerous just because of what they are?”

“But how far do we go before we are no better?” Ines counters, her accent thick with emotion. “We may eat different flesh, but are we better than them if we become like them in all other things? If we will kill them? If we will do anything, just to stay alive? Is it worth it to live this way?”

“So, what, we just give up? We just sit down and let ourselves die?” I ask.

Ines looks me dead in the eye.

“I tried. But you would not let me.”

I look away. That was stupid of me to say. Maybe I’m just as absurd as she is in different ways, and for different reasons. Ultimately, there’s only one possible solution, one way for both of us to get what we want.

“I…alright, Ines. I get it. And you’re right – at a certain point, it’s not worth it to live this way. So let’s get to Ashborne, and then we’ll decide what we think and what to do about it.”

Ines thinks about it for a minute or two, during which time I check to make sure that Bloody Mary isn’t causing any more trouble. She sits there, one leg stretched out, the other curled beneath her, and I reach down, tossing her another raccoon leg. She takes it indignantly and chews on it, now refusing to look at me directly, making angry grunting sounds while she eats.

“Alright,” Ines concedes. “First Ashborne, then we decide.”

We sit there in awkward quiet, and I look up toward the roof. Outside, the sun is almost done setting, and night is rolling in.

“We should go in soon,” I say, gesturing to the safe room.

Ines looks over at Bloody Mary, then back to me and looks like she wants to say something, but knows it won’t be a good idea. I shake my head. I’m not letting that thing into our safe room with us. I’m determined that she’ll stay tied up out here tonight. We can argue about what to do with her tomorrow before we leave, at least once Ines has finished repairs on the bike.

Ines doesn’t try to argue, and we finish the rest of our meal in silence. Once the fire is put out and the raccoon is wrapped up, we move everything inside the safe room, especially the motorbike and all its parts. I’m amazed at how much more intact it looks since Ines began working on it just a few hours earlier. Once I’ve made sure that the cord holding Bloody Mary is secure to the post and that she is gagged with her hands tied behind her, I leave her there and head into the safe room, closing the door tightly behind me. No sounds come from her, and she makes no effort to resist, which gives me hope that the dark hours will pass without incident.

Once we’re in for the night and ready for sleep, Ines lays our bedrolls out side-by-side and we stretch out with mutual sighs of exhaustion. I lay my head back and close my eyes, thinking of what life will be like when we finally get to Ashborne, either tomorrow or the day after. It hardly feels real.

“First,” I murmur. “I’m going to eat a giant dinner, and then take a hot shower, and then sleep for fourteen hours straight.”

“What do you want to eat?” Ines asks.

“Oh, I don’t really care, but…oh, man, a giant, half-pound burger with cheese, lettuce, tomatos, and onions sounds really good, or maybe a big ol’ steak! With mashed potatoes and butter! And twenty pounds of bacon!”

Ines giggles, which makes me do the same.

“I want a shower, too,” she says, and I can tell she’s smiling in the dark. “And a horse.”

“What’ll you name it?”

“My last one was Caramel, so I want a brown one, and I’ll call it *Chocolat*,” she tells me.

“Mmmmm…chocolate…” I hum. “Oh, that sounds good, too…”

Ines shuffles and scoots closer, laying across my chest and snuggling in.

“Matt,” she begins softly. “When we argue, I sound *très ingrate*, very ungrateful. But I’m not. You saved my life, and from other, more terrible things, so…it’s not because I’m ungrateful that I argue.”

I smile. “I think the word you’re looking for is, *“Merci.*”

Ines laughs, probably at my awful pronunciation.

“*Oui, merci beaucoup*,” she replies. “Now your turn.”

“Huh?”

“Tell me something you’re grateful to me for.”

“For real?”

“*Oui*, for real,” she says, mocking my tone.

“Hmmm…well, how do you say ‘goodnight’ in French?”

“*Bonne nuit.*”

“Well, *merci beaucoup.* *Bonne nuit,* Ines.”

She mutters something in French that I don’t understand, and she doesn’t offer to translate by the time I fall asleep.

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The next morning, I venture out carefully to check and see if Bloody Mary is still there. Sure enough, I find her just waking up. She opens her eyes and pushes herself up to a sitting position when I exit the room, Ines close behind. We stretch out, and so does she, looking like a dog just waking up from a nap.

I spend a few minutes slipping into the motorbike armor, altering my backpack contents to make room for any scavenge finds, and adjusting my belt, and then I fit all of my weapons in their place, slinging my bow over my shoulder. By the time I’m ready to go, Ines is already hard at work on the motorbike. I notice a few containers stacked over to the side holding some sort of liquid.

“What are those?” I’m almost too afraid to ask.

“The fuel from the tank,” she tells me. I’m surprised at how much of it there is.

“Wow…if you get it ready, make sure you test it to see if it works first.”

She sits back on her haunches and looks up at me. “Where are you going?”

“I want to search a few places I saw yesterday before we move on.”

I reach down and grab one of the radios, giving her the other one.

“Stay in *touché*,” I smirk.

“*Tu estes nul*, not how you say it*,*” she mutters, rolling her eyes and turning back to the bike.

“Whatever you say, Blanch…” I call back as I walk away.

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The camping store looks like every other place in here that’s survived the apocalypse, except with a few more intact shelves than other places. The floor in here has also been mostly spared from the weather and creature grime, even if there are a few droppings in places. I recall having to check my steps every time I went to my parents’ house since they had a dog. Now, I have to watch where I go for different reasons, since various scents attract different predators or alert sensitive prey. What was once an inconvenience is now a survival tactic.

That nagging sense that I don’t belong here begins to creep back up, and I pull out my short blade as I peruse the disheveled aisles, keeping my eyes peeled for boons and beasts alike. My boots nudge the broken glass (the ever-present prop of our world) and take me all over the store until I come to the last aisle. All I have for my trouble is a single bar of biodegradable soap.

“Ines,” I say into the radio. “How’s it coming?”

After a moment’s wait, she replies with a quick, “Almost done.”

I nearly ask her to let me know when she’s done, but she will. I’m excited to get moving, and I need to focus. My flashlight finds something along the back wall, a door to a back room or area. When I try the metal knob, it’s locked. I check to make sure nothing is around, and then I bash the knob off with my survival axe. The pieces clink on the floor and the door slides open.

I expect to find darkness, but I’m actually met with rays of sun. This back room sits beneath a big hole in the ceiling, which reaches all the way to the top through crisscrossing rebar, metal beams, and old wiring. A makeshift access shaft, punctuated by sections of ropes and extension cords tied to various places to provide handholds where needed.

In the middle of this back room, which I can tell used to be some sort of storage closet, sits a collection of wonderful things. Five bags of MREs are tied together around a large, solar-powered freezer unit, inside of which I find over a dozen bottles of beer and several thick packages of food! There are also water purification tablets in a plastic bag among the treasure trove.

“Nice!” I exclaim. Checking my surroundings for anything hazardous, I slowly remove one of the packages and check its contents. It’s several slices of cut meat, likely from a deer or other large animal, preserved with salt and wrapped with paper and plastic packaging, held together with rubber bands. It can’t be more than a week or two old. It must have been dropped here shortly before Ines and I stumbled into the strip.

There’s no way to know who left all of this here, but it definitely wasn’t meant for me to find. It could be from Ashborne, raising plenty of arguments both for and against moving any of it. Or, it’s from someone else who lives in the area, and the odds are well against finding them. Still, on the off-chance that this is valuable to someone still living, I don’t know if I can justify taking all of it. We’ll only need a few meals to reach Ashborne (and maybe one or two extra if things don’t go as planned), so I grab five of the MREs and stuff them into my pack, along with at least four bottles of beer. Looking carefully at one of them, I realize just then that it’s not for drinking – something else is swirling around inside. I anticipate that I’ll regret investigating at first, judging by the potential vile nature of what it might be, but I soon realize that it’s much more practical than it is odious. It’s alcohol mixed with few spoonfuls of motor oil, which can only mean one thing – these bottles are pre-made Molotov cocktails. All that’s missing is a rag and a flame for each of them, and I have plenty of both.

Knowing this, I pack two more, bringing my total to six. I’m leaving more than I’m taking, so once again I make sure to congratulate myself for being willing to put others first.

My radio squawks.

“Matt!” comes Ines’s animated voice.

“What’s up?”

She doesn’t say anything, but I hear a metallic rumble in the background.

“You did it!” I exclaim.

“I did,” she says proudly. “And I took it for a quick ride, so I know it works.”

“Awesome!”

“She got very upset when I did, but I think she may just be afraid of being left behind.”

I open my mouth to agree with her, and to say that now we will have to decide what to do with her when I get back, but then I stop as my brain puts the pieces of a premonition together. Ines got the bike working, which means there’s an engine running. The last time I used something with an engine, they tracked me for miles. I had to drive for two days to lose them.

“Ines, turn it off, now!” I urgently say.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t let them hear it. If they hear it, they’ll know right where to look!”

“But—“

Ines’s voice is drowned out by Bloody Mary’s unbelievably loud shriek. She must have gotten free of her gag somehow. Ines yells at her to be quiet and I hear the snap-snap-snap of the Taser. Then there’s a new sound, and Ines cries out in panic. More snarls, growls, and scuffling. They’ve found her.

I break into a sprint, blasting out the door, the leaning shelves blurring by. The radio is still transmitting, but I don’t need it to hear the shots from Ines’s sidearm, or the deafening bellow, the one that’s been haunting my dreams ever since the police station. Her screams reach me loud and clear.

At full speed, it takes me almost three minutes to reach our area, and by then it’s already far too late.