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Confession

 I knew this would happen. It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. I even remember considering this before bringing Ines into my charge the first time, and now that she’s (relatively) healthy and mobile, it’s worse than ever. I’ve spent so much time and effort worrying about her since she was taken that I’ve failed to take proper inventory of our things and care for my wounds. I felt it the entire time we were in the furniture store, especially when we were running from the Stalkers – the warm wetness running down my side, my injuries from my battle with Scar-Face. Breathing has become more difficult, likely because my broken rib (or ribs) is pushing against something it shouldn’t and is causing some swelling. I need a place to lie low.

 Still, Ines is my main focus. Whether is because I have a natural, sacrificial, protective instinct, or I’m tapping into deep reservoirs of patronizing chauvinism, it seems impossible to think of stopping right now. We walk, wordlessly, for at least an hour after leaving the appliance store, which gradually stretches on and on as the pain becomes worse and worse. With my mind racing regarding Ines so much, I hardly notice how debilitated I become in that short span of time. I can’t allow myself to get that way, or I might end up losing her again. I’d never be able to live with myself if that happened.

 She’s more resilient than both of us combined. When I have to rest against a wall, she pulls out her .22 and watches our back.

 “We should stop for the night,” she tells me.

 I try to resist, wanting to insist that we put as much distance as possible between ourselves and those black, red-eyed things, but I see the daylight dimming when I force my eyes open, also knowing that I can’t go much further regardless of the time of day.

 “See…anything good…?” I ask between gasps. The hand I put to my side to stifle the aching comes away slick with crimson. She takes my scope from my backpack and looks at something in the distance, then puts it in her pocket.

 “Let’s go,” she says. “I see a place.”

 She seems confident, so I don’t inquire further. When we arrive at our destination, she’s led me to an old, rundown apartment complex, and the sun has begun to touch the horizon. It takes both of us a moment before we realize that she’s going to have to take the lead in scouting this one out. Her sidearm is still in her hands, along with a flashlight, so she takes point as we make our entrance.

 Ivy and other vines have overgrown the front door, so Ines uses my sword to cut a path inside. The door itself is absent, and the lack of security is only the third or fourth thing on my mind as I painfully stagger down the hall behind Ines. The wall on one side is old tile, wallpaper on the other, both in various stages of decay and decline. Remains of furniture and piles of garbage cause us to zigzag on our path to the end of the hall where the stairway is barely visible in the growing dark.

 My climb up the stairs reminds me of my agonizing return from the basement of my brawl with those mutants in that house before I met Ines. The effort it takes just to get one foot up to the next step is dwarfed by the seemingly impossible task to push my bodyweight that much higher with the opposite leg. The rail I’m clutching helps, but it still takes Ines with an arm under my shoulders to help drag my walking carcass up the last little bit to the top. Once there, I pull out my own pistol and sit across from the stairs while Ines goes down the hall and checks the rooms. She leaves my radio in my lap just to be safe, and I rest secure knowing that she’ll be back. I had forgotten what it was like to be able to rely on someone else, and it does my heart some real good knowing that Ines is strong enough to take care of us both, especially now.

 After a length of time, Ines returns. My eyes are closed, so I listen to her footsteps approach. When she gets partway to me, her pace quickens.

 “Matt…!” she gasps, and I open my eyes to let her know I’m not dead. She sighs and reaches to help me up.

 “Stay with me just a bit longer,” she insists, half-carrying me toward the room she found. She leads me past a hole in the ceiling that leads up to the next level, the floor covered in plaster, splinters, and dust. The apartment we will call home isn’t much better – the living area contains half a couch, and all the carpet has been torn up, leaving the splotched, stained patterns as our pathway. The doorway from there to what was once the bathroom is a gaping hole; the actual frame is missing, as indicated by the broken plywood and old insulation poking out of the wall. Ines takes me into the bedroom, where she’s put our bedrolls (she must have taken them sometime when I was focusing on staying awake). An old, empty wardrobe hangs open, and Ines takes my coat, backpack, and utility belt and puts them inside, shutting the door as securely as possible.

 When I lay down onto the blanket and pillow roll, my throbbing and aching side shouts a hallelujah chorus of relief, and I begin to breathe easy again for the first time in hours. I will not be getting up for some time.

 “You rest,” Ines instructs. “I am going to lock us in, then I will look at your injury before we go to bed.”

 “…careful…” I mumble. I think she replies, but I’m not awake enough to hear it. My eyes flitter open once more before I doze of completely, and when they do, they see Ines at my side, her hands working to patch me up with what little material we have left. By the time she sinks under the blanket next to me, I’m gleefully dead (not literally) to the world.

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 When I awake, the sun is beginning to set again, though its light is dimmed by dark, heavy clouds. As I groan and stretch my aching limbs, my side flares up, interrupting my relaxed yawn, but it’s not nearly as bad as it was before. The light of a fire flickers from the next room, and I attempt to move. She’s there in moments – she must have heard the noise of me waking up. With help, I stagger into the living room and lie down by the fire Ines started in an empty two-gallon can and set by the window to let out the smoke. A light, chilled rain brings a refreshing smell in the form of a gentle breeze.

Ines informs me that I’ve been resting comfortably for three days, and I come wide awake with that revelation. She’s been keeping vigil over me the whole time, only leaving me twice, once to search more of the apartment complex, and once to bring into the room the provision she discovered on the third floor. A couple other two-gallon cans containing whole kernel corn and green beans lie off to one side of the room, surrounded by other smaller cans that include sliced mushrooms, peas, carrots, tuna fish, jellied cranberry sauce, beans, and tomato soup (more of this last one than almost all the others combined).

“Holy crap…” I exclaim quietly, propping myself up on my elbows to see it all.

Ines grins proudly.

“I told you this place was going to be good,” she says. But she says it with grim finality, not with her usual traces of competitive, good-natured snark. Plus, I don’t remember her saying that – it must have been while I was in and out. Regardless, this is a place where we can rest and I can recover before we continue or journey. The thought brings me back to our earlier agenda.

“Ashborne…” I murmur, leaning back.

Ines looks at the floor.

“Do you think we will actually make it there?” she asks me. Her question is teetering on the edge of a chasm of hopelessness.

I sigh. “We have to.”

She stares at me, and I turn my head to look back at her.

“I’m not stopping,” I say. “We’re going to get to Ashborne or die trying.”

She looks back at the floor.

“I know.” She says it like she knew what I would say all along.

“Don’t give up,” I insist. “We can’t give up.”

Her eyes are a million miles away for a long time. Then, she gets up and goes over to the fire, where she’s made a makeshift tripod with sticks and thread. Two of the small cans dangle from the middle of it on strips of cloth, steaming. She carefully removes them and pours some of each can into each of our mess kit plates. The hot food smells wonderful – pieces of tuna boiled in tomato soup – and I catch myself drooling as she brings it over to me. My stomach makes a loud noise, eliciting a fond smile from her as she spoon-feeds me my dinner before scarfing down her own. Her slurping makes a funny sound, and I chuckle, but she doesn’t react.

 She doesn’t let me help clean up after dinner, and when I don’t want to listen to her, she shoves something into my hands. The word ‘Shakespeare’ leaps off the cover immediately, and I stare at it open-mouthed.

 “Enjoy,” Ines says curtly, going back to work.

 I do indeed enjoy this new treasure, a nearly pristine copy of *Hamlet*. Although the irony doesn’t strike me now, I will remember this moment in years to come and hate every second of it by then. But at the time, I greedily devour the pages of my gift as ravenously as Ines had eaten her soup.

 Ines finishes cleaning up for the night and makes her way over to her bedroll on the other side of the room. By the time I notice, she is already settled in, so I don’t say anything.

The combination of my long rest and the book in my hands keeps me awake for some time longer. About an hour into the night, I rise after two or three attempts and add fuel to the fire. I also am able to close the window, which wakes Ines.

 “Sorry,” I tell her.

She tells me it’s fine, but that I shouldn’t be standing up, so I go back to bed rather than argue with my half-asleep companion. I tug my bedroll over next to hers and lay myself down beside her, feeling the pleasant warmth of the fire from one side and her body heat from the other. She faces away from me and doesn’t turn around.

“’Night,” I say.

The silent non-response is what finally convinces me to stop talking. We lie there, neither of us getting much sleep that night. We’re both drifting behind our eyelids when the first rays of sunlight peek out from behind the rainclouds.

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 My body doesn’t realize how tired it still is until I try to stand up too quickly after waking later that day. I have to sit down almost immediately, and Ines is by my side, concern plastered onto her every feature. Once I get ahold of myself, I refuse to be coddled any longer. I have to check our surroundings.

 “Ines, gimme the scope,” I tell her, trying to make sure she understands I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. She complies without arguing but clearly isn’t thrilled about it. We lean against the window frame, and I survey the area. I can see out toward the street on the right, but the left is blocked by the roof of another building.

 “Gotta get higher,” I tell us both.

 “Matt…” Ines sighs.

 “It’s been four days, Ines,” I remind her. “I need the exercise.”

 “Fine,” she mutters, then goes to grab our packs.

 “Look at it this way,” I continue, trying to be encouraging. “At least it will help us gauge how long I need to rest before we keep going.”

 “Only if you let me check your wounds when we get upstairs,” she says, and I can tell she means it. I nod, and she helps me put my backpack on. It isn’t as hard as I thought it might be, but I still move gingerly to avoid aggravating my side. My coat and belt feel heavy on me. Ines takes it upon herself to carry the rest of the canned food in addition to her regular luggage.

 We trudge upstairs, and I’m happy to find that my legs comply with far less resistance than Ines throws my way. In the midst of it all, she makes the suggestion that as long as we’re going up, we may as well use the room where all of the cans are stored. I agree, and by the time we reach said room on the fourth floor (the top floor of the apartment complex), I’m able to tell roughly how far my recovery has come. I wager we’ll be fine if we wait another day or two and then set out for Ashborne again. Every time I think of that place, I imagine little cottages dotting an open field with sparse trees for shade and a freshwater river running through the middle of it. That’s obviously not reality (we don’t even need to get there for me to know that), but it makes it easier to imagine the beds, showers, and food we’ll have in abundance.

 The canned food in this apartment, however, is still plentiful enough to last as long as we could ever want. I spend most of the day trying to figure out how to get as much of it into our packs as possible to take with us, but it will be harder to go forward from here than it was to arrive since we’ll be on foot. Although, now that I think about it…

 “There are a lot of cars out there,” I ponder, staring out one of the windows for the tenth time. The area is much more visible now that we’re twice as high as we were. The street goes for some distance in both directions, and there aren’t very many buildings around that are taller than this one. In the distance, about half-a-mile away, is the furniture store. A shudder runs unbidden down my spine. I’m grateful upon checking the direction of the sun that we won’t have to go back that way to head toward Ashborne. Even if we did, I’d probably just want to take a long detour to avoid being any closer to it than we are now. If I never see one of those nasty, black Stalkers again, it will still be too soon.

 I force my focus back to the many motor vehicles that litter the road below and think back to our escape. How far did we go from our path to Ashborne when we left the office building? Did we get any closer? Farther away? I’m unsure of the answer – while we were driving, I wasn’t paying any attention to the sun. It was four days from the strip mall, but I was only focused on tracking Bloody Mary when I left the mall, so I don’t remember if the mutants’ office building was closer to Ashborne than the mall or farther. For all I know, we could have driven past it after we left, or been right next to it and gone further away.

 All that’s left is to head north and hope for the best. Maybe if we’re lucky, we can pick up another clue as to its location if we’re diligent in our search. Like I said to Ines, giving up is not an option. Therefore, tonight, we will feast.

 I immediately grab the gallon can Ines used earlier to brew stew and another full gallon can of corn. I half the corn into each can, making sure to put an equal amount of its juices in both. Then, I dump in some tomato soup, tuna, mushrooms, carrots, and beans. The cranberry sauce will be for dessert. The anticipation makes me giggle a little, and another one of those wan smiles breaks through Ines’s morbid plaster.

 As we sit back rather comfortably, waiting for our royal fare to be ready, I busy myself with sharpening my short sword and knives. Occasionally, my eyes drift to my left, where I expect to see my trusty katana sitting there, slumbering watchfully in its scabbard, ever-ready to respond to our troubles. Its absence leaves a void that none of the rest of the tools in our inventory can placate. What is Scar-Face doing with it right now, I wonder. I remember my vow to kill him the next time I see him, and the impracticality of that task now strikes me, knowing that he may very well have learned by now how to use the weapon better than I do.

 The thought makes me pause in my activity, and when I return to the present, Ines is giving me a sidelong look.

 “What is it?” she asks.

 I lean forward, setting the blade down by its sheath.

 “You first,” I reply.

 She frowns and looks away, rubbing her neck. She shrugs and looks back at me, but I don’t say anything. All I do is look at her with an unblinking stare. She opens her mouth to speak, then stops, then looks down. Finally, after a silence that’s killing me, she begins her terrible confession by asking a question.

 “What do you want to do in Ashborne?”

 I didn’t expect that question, but she looks back at me with insistence. It takes me a little bit to think about what she might be asking since we’ve already sort of talked about this, but there’s more to her wondering this time, so I try to respond as promptly as I can.

 “Well,” I begin. “First, I’m going to take a long, hot shower, then I’m going to eat myself sick, then I want to sleep in a real bed—”

 “*Non*,” she interrupts. “What I mean is, what sort of life do you want?”

 Now it makes sense, and my socially dull brain is beginning to put some pieces together. I’d never really thought about it before. I’ve been looking forward to the escape from hunger, fear, and discomfort, but this life I have now – it makes sense to me. It isn’t an easy life, but it’s a simple one. I can find places to sleep, and as long as Ines is with me, I have everything I want, minus some of the more basic comforts of home. I’ve been pushing so hard to get to this new place, but all the things I’m looking forward to are momentary and fleeting. The only thing that would be lasting would be the absence of constant fear, and in a world like this, that fear is ever-present no matter where we are. Do I want to reach Ashborne? Sure…I guess. But what do I want to do (or be) after we get there?

 “Well…I guess we could have a house or something...maybe I can be a part of the group that helps guard the town…you could do…I dunno, what do you want to do?”

 Ines bites her bottom lip and her chin trembles. She’s trying not to cry.

 “Ines, what…?”

 When I reach out to touch her hand, she pulls away.

 “Ines, what’s gotten into you?”

 She puts her face in her hands as I stand and circle the fire to sit beside her.

 “Matt…I don’t think I can go,” she tells me with a choked voice.

 “What? Why?”

 “And you should leave me behind.”

 “Excuse me?!”

 Ines’s shoulders start to shake, and the tears finally start to fall.

 “I’m late…” she weeps. “That thing…he took me, and he…and now I’m late…”

 What she’s saying without saying is nearly incomprehensible to me, so I’m left sitting there in shock as she retreats to the other side of the room, into the darkening light, hugging her knees away from the fire. My stomach churns for several moments, and I’m reacquainted with that nauseating sensation from the police station when I saw how Scar-Face looked at her. A curse flies from my mouth at the hideous visage from my nightmares, and I can’t tell whether I’m cursing his face or the torn one I see when I look in the mirror. He’s stolen so much from us, and I wasn’t strong enough to stop it. She was at his mercy while I was raging against the wind. While I was tracking Bloody Mary slowing across the countryside, he was leaving his mark on her forever, scarring her heart and her body. Now, he’s left her crying in the corner, and I’ll be damned if I leave her to suffer alone.

 “Just go,” she tells me when I approach. “Just leave…you don’t have to go through this with me. Eventually, he will come for me, and you cannot be here when he does.”

 When I don’t move from my kneeling position beside her, she looks at me and yells. I hear the pain in her voice.

 “Why are you still here?!”

 I reach out and grab her shoulders, forcing her to face me.

 “Ines…what did I say yesterday about reaching Ashborne?”

 “You said you would get there or die trying.”

 “No…I said ***we*** would get there or die trying. I told you I wasn’t giving up.”

 “But you didn’t know about…about me…about me and him, and what he did…”

 “I know everything I need to know,” I say firmly. “If he comes back for you, he’s going to have to go through me.”

 “But…even if he doesn’t…what happens when I…?” She can’t finish the sentence.

 “It doesn’t matter,” I tell her. “If that’s what it is, we’ll figure it out together. I promise. I’m not going anywhere. I won’t just walk away and let you suffer by yourself. We will keep fighting.”

 Ines trembles and grabs my coat. She holds on for dear life.

 “Matt…I don’t know if I can keep fighting…I’m scared…”

 All I can do is nod. I’m scared, too. But the fear of losing her is greatest, so I hold her tightly also, until both of us drift off to sleep, staying in the safety of the dark away from the fire. It takes us several hours to finally close our eyes, and neither of us speak for the rest of the night. There’s nothing left to say, and too much to think about.

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 I wake with a start the next morning. The sun has fully risen. What jerked me to consciousness isn’t readily apparent, but I didn’t sleep well. Ines is sitting by the fire she rekindled, picking at the plentiful remains of the stew neither of us ate. It’s a shame to waste all that food, but there’s easily ten times as much on the other side of the room.

 A cold wind blows in and chills me, so I wrap my coat tightly around me and come over to the fire. Its warmth has already begun to permeate the room.

 “Morning,” I say to Ines.

 “Morning,” she says back. It’s not as cheery as it used to be, but the completely despondent countenance has improved. “Sorry I woke you.”

 I remember now – it was a thudding that woke me up.

 “It’s fine. Did you sleep at all?”

 She nods. “A little.” Her cheeks flush. “Thanks to you.”

 I feel my ears growing warm, and not from the fire.

 “I meant what I said,” I insist.

 “I know.” She moves unexpectedly close and kisses me on the cheek. It lasts for some time. We share a tender smile, one shared by people who have been through too much together and who will soon go through too much more.

 I gesture toward the fire.

 “Cooking some new stew?”

 “No, I was going to warm what we had. We should not let it go to waste.”

 “Well, good. I thought maybe you’d been dropping those cans, and that’s where all the bumps in the night came from.”

 I receive a confused look.

 “First, I am not that clumsy, that is offensive, and second, what bumps?”

 “You know, that thudding that woke me up?”

 She shakes her head. “There was no thudding.”

 My face scrunches as I think back over the moments when I woke up. It might have just been my heartbeat, or…

 On an impulse, I kneel down and put my ear to the floor, listening for anything resembling what I thought I had heard. Nothing.

 Ines stares at me, her expression a flawless concoction of concern and ridicule.

 “Matt, I’m starting to worry about you,” she remarks. “If you hit your head back there, then do you *really* remember what you told me last night?”

 She saunters behind me and gives me a crisp slap on the rear, which boosts me to my feet. As I tell her off, finally bringing out one of those smiles I now live by, I swear I hear it again. Another thud. I pause.

 “There! You hear that?”

 Ines raises and eyebrow and is probably about to say something snarky, but then it becomes louder – a distinct bump. We stop and listen some more, then look at the warming stew. A few seconds later, the next thud causes ripples.

 That’s when we hear it – the deep-throated, gargle-like bellow.

 The Harvester has found us.