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Merci, Priceline

We have to leave nearly all of the canned food behind – there’s no way to carry it with our injuries.  Ines’s ankle isn’t broken (I can’t believe it isn’t broken!), but it’s extremely hard for her to walk on it.  My arm hangs from my body, and my shoulder is distended at an unnatural angle. We’re barely able to find a vehicle that runs in time to get away, so there’s no chance to take inventory.  Oh, and the best part is that the gas tank isn’t even half-full.

Scar-Face is closer than we thought.  By the time we pull away from where the SUV is parked, down the street from the apartment complex, those brownish-pale shapes are moving around on the tops of nearby buildings.  Through my scope, I observe several of them stop at the entrance to the furniture store far at the other end of the road. One or two of them stick their heads inside the door, but quickly flee the scene, and the door is shut again from the inside.  I catch a glimpse of Scar-Face, who is still holding my katana – with his pack close behind, he boldly marches right in, and the battle commences. Somehow, nothing about that scenario makes me feel better about anything – I don’t imagine that Scar-Face will meet his end against the Stalkers.

Ines checks our belongings as we drive; the bolt cutters, batteries, the mess kit, crowbar, blanket rolls, and extra filters for our water bottles are all gone, left behind in the mad dash to evacuate.  Left in my backpack is my water bottle, the scope I was using to watch our backs, the survival axe, and the bow (with only three arrows left). In her pack, only her own water bottle and filtered drinking straw remain.

We stop after almost an hour of driving to tend to each other’s wounds, using up the last of our medical supplies.  The rest of the ibuprofen, hydrogen peroxide, antibiotic ointment, and bandage cloths are completely exhausted, providing us both with much-needed treatment.  The worst moment comes when Ines pulls my shoulder back into its socket – my cry of pain can probably be heard for miles, even though I’m nearly biting through the stick Ines shoves in between my teeth.  We’re able to get ourselves relatively clean from all the blood and gore we accumulated during the fight, but we’re nowhere near as sanitary as we ought to be. We simply don’t have time.

The only other thing we have is a little more ammunition for our guns.  I was able to snag some boxes, giving us fifty more 9mm rounds and one hundred rounds for Ines’s .22, which will get us out of at least one or two more tight spots, assuming we don’t lose any of it.

The SUV takes us about fifty miles over some rough terrain.  We leave the town behind, opting for more rural countryside in an effort to put some distance between us and the cannibals.  In spite of the anxiety, Ines is able to catch a little shuteye.

Then, we run out of gas.  I had been dreading that moment ever since we set out from the apartments, and the feeling of stepping out of the safety of the metal walls of our vehicle was every bit as dread-inducing as I imagined.  We’re stopped in the middle of a grove of trees – I directed the car here when I saw we might be abandoning it soon. It’s shortly after midday, and a cluster of gray clouds has moved in front of the sun.  The wind blows through the trees, carrying with it a pleasant, relaxing scent of pure, unadulterated forest. I allow myself a brief moment of remembering the hikes my father used to take me on when I was young, and then I help Ines out of the car.

She winces sharply in pain, a tense breath in through her teeth, but she bears it and refuses to allow it to slow her down.

“Maybe we can rest a little bit longer,” I suggest, knowing how foolish it is.  She knows it, too, and shakes her head.

“I can go for a little while,” she insists, so we begin our hike.

We trek for about a mile, me supporting her as she limps onward.  I can’t imagine how bad her ankle feels, throbbing and swollen. Sparing a glance at her soon after our first mile marker, the tear streaks from the agony become visible in the overcast light.

I’m about to more strongly suggest we rest, but in the distance from where we entered the tree with our SUV, a telltale shriek lets us know that is even less of a choice now than it was before.  Don’t these things ever stop?

“How bad is it?” I ask.  “Scale of one to ten.”

“I am fine,” she hisses through her teeth, more droplets leaking from her tightly shut eyes.

“How bad?” I repeat.

She takes a few more steps and pain-filled gasps.

“It’s a nine,” she tells me, trying to understate just enough to convince me.  It doesn’t work.

“Talk to me,” I say.  “Take your mind off how much it hurts.”

“About what?” she gasps skeptically.

It takes me a minute or two to rack my brain for a suitable topic.  Meanwhile, we almost trip over a barely exposed root, and I stagger to keep Ines from having to put all her weight on her bad leg.

I select something that I hope will get her riled up enough to distract her (and me) from the situation at hand.

“What’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever seen someone do?”

She pauses, thinking, and already I can see the change in her face, concentrated on something other than her injury.  Then, with a sputter (of contempt or discomfort maybe), she starts.

“There is a lot to pick from, obviously.  Well…I once knew a girl in college back in France named Genelle.  She was part of *Ceux Conscients*, that activist group, with Pierre and I, and we became good friends.  Her parents decided to adopt a little boy from South Africa. They sent them pictures of this adorable little boy who was seven, and also a letter he had written to them thanking them for wanting to bring him to live in France.  His name was Thato. They spent five months raising the money to pay for the trip to go and get him, but then a few days before their plane was scheduled to leave, the adoption agency told them that Thato had been diagnosed with AIDS.  They had known all along, but had not told them because they didn’t want them to refuse Thato.”

“That couldn’t have been legal,” I mutter.

“No, it wasn’t,” she confirms.  “But that’s not the worst part. In the end, that made all the difference.  They decided they didn’t want Thato after all and cancelled the flight. They asked for their money back, but the agency didn’t want to give it to them, so they tried to take it to court.  And I never found out what happened to Thato, if he eventually got adopted or didn’t.”

“That’s…wow…” is all I can utter.  “That’s pretty terrible.”

Ines nods.  “Genelle tried to convince her parents to adopt him anyway, but they wouldn’t listen.  Her father was angry at the agency, and her mother didn’t want to have to care for a boy with a ‘condition’.”

“So who are you saying was the worst offender in that situation?”

“I don’t know…the parents, I suppose,” Ines concludes.  “They had already committed to that little boy, and he was so excited to meet them.  They should have gone through with it. What if they were the last ones to ever give him a chance?”

I shake my head.  “I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him his new parents didn’t want him anymore.”

“I couldn’t do it,” Ines admits.

“How long ago was this?”

“Four years, at least,” Ines grimaces.  “I hope he made it through all of this somehow…”

Then, her expression changes, and she shakes her head.  “No, I changed my mind. I don’t hope for that.”

Casting a wary glance her way, I ask, “Well, what’s worse?  Dying from AIDS or living through this with it?”

Ines doesn’t have an answer, and of course, neither do I.

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Night seems to fall quickly with the assistance of the cloud cover.  My eyes are twitching in the light level that’s just high enough to see our surroundings but not enough to see them in detail.  Everything has a shroud of gray cast over it, including our morale. It’s unclear how far we’ve been able to travel, making our way carefully around obstacles that would have posed no trouble to us under normal circumstances.  Ines would never admit it, but she is grateful when we finally stop for the evening. I refuse to leave her side, so we stagger around together to find some sort of shelter. I’ve seen the cannibals jump through the trees before, so if they decided to come our way, we’re in the worst possible spot.  That mentality leads me to search for any kind of cover to disguise our presence from sight if not from smell. Our odor can probably be picked up from a ridiculous distance away, so there will be no hope for us if they catch onto it. But, then again, if it’s our time to go, it won’t make any difference anyway.

We’ve almost given up searching when I stumble upon a dead tree amidst the others, a large hole in the side of it.  Ines takes the opportunity to sit while I pull out a blade and make sure it’s safe. There could be any number of critters that call this tree home, but after the Harvester and Scar-Face, and also because of how thoroughly exhausted I am, nothing could intimidate me anymore.  Two raccoons and a few other furry woodland creatures scatter when I step inside, brushing against my legs on the way out, and I almost have the presence of mind to spear one for dinner, but my body is too slow.

The hole in the tree leads to a bed of roots that are decaying but not fully without structure.  The hollow tree is just big enough for us to squeeze it, even if it is cramped. Just turning to get out is a chore, and I can already tell that we’re going to wake up sore and stiff from how we’re going to sleep in a ball.  My ribs are going to kill me tomorrow. But it’s not as if we have any other real options for hiding; as long as a strong gust doesn’t rip the tree out of the ground (and of course, now that I think about it, it’ll happen), we should be fine.

With some heavy swings, I cut some extra foliage to drag in front of the opening, then return to where Ines sits, trying to get her other boot off, the one on her injured ankle.  With my help, it comes off inch by inch as I try to be cautious of causing her more agony. By the time I remove it, I’m praying that it we’ll be able to get it back on in the morning with how swollen her ankle has become.  There’s a knot above her foot the size of a grapefruit, and I’m starting to reconsider whether or not I think it’s broken. In the dim light, we can’t tell exactly the coloration of the injury, but both of us are probably grateful for that.  I wish more than anything we had some ice, but we have to settle for binding it tightly with our socks and a strip I cut from my coat to keep the swelling down. If it gets any worse, there’s no way she’ll fit into her boot tomorrow.

Slowly and carefully, I climb into the tree and help her climb in on top of me.  She leans back against my chest, her head resting in the pit of my shoulder right under my collarbone, and I position my legs and feet so that if I move in the night, it will agitate her ankle as little as possible.

“Comfy?” I ask with a hint of sarcasm.  She picks up on it, which lifts my spirit.

“Obviously.  This hotel is four stars.  *Merci*, Priceline©.”

I snort.  “Better than most motels I’ve been in.”

“Oh, you think the American ones are bad?  I know places in France where we would not wake up the next day in one piece.  Literally, someone would have stolen a kidney from one of us, or both.”

“How do you know about—?”

“Don’t ask.”  She yawns. “I want to sleep now.”

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Early morning brings a foul stench, and it takes longer than it should to figure out that it’s the smelly, brown gift some rodent left for me to roll into last night and not my own odorous stink (although it doesn’t stop Ines from blaming me – somehow, it makes the whole scene more amusing to let her think it’s true).

We both groan as we try to move for the first time in several hours.  Our limbs react sluggishly or not at all, and we spend a few minutes prying ourselves from our sleep-induced rigor mortis.  It’s still dark outside, darker than either of us would prefer, so Ines is careful when poking her head out. We try not to make too much noise.

The trees silently emerge from a layer of mist along the forest floor, black columns of mystery rising above low clouds.  My deep, early-morning breath tastes like dew, smells like the night, and enables me to open my eyes fully to allow my vision to clear.  If we hadn’t entered the tree from a specific direction, there’s no way I’d remember which way we had been headed when we stopped last night.

We’re checking our ever-dwindling supplies when a noise from above sets us on edge.  Something is in the dark and distant treetops. Ines and I check one another’s faces for reactions, unsure.  It could just be a squirrel. Or it could be something else. Ines winces as she puts too much weight on her ankle – we don’t have time to wonder.  I sit her down, trying to fit her boot back onto her foot. Her swollen ankle prevents me from pushing it all the way on, much less tying the laces, and I have to stop and silence her gritted-teeth groans to listen again for the sound of whatever it is moving among the branches.  It’s right above us now.

“Leave it,” Ines whispers.

Unwilling to leave her piece of footwear behind for good, I stuff it into her haversack and slip the pack over her shoulder, then make sure all of my equipment is securely stowed before reaching for her again.  As I heft her into my arms, the sound of crackling bark comes from right behind us, from the tree we just left. I drop Ines’s legs with my right arm and spin, my pistol at the ready. He’s too fast and leaps from the tree as the bullet pierces deep into the trunk, the report ringing in our ears.  His brown body tumbles, leaving wisps of trailing mist along the ground, his bone-necklace clinking together musically. He vanishes into the dim morning, scurrying up one of the other trees out of sight, his wailing screech alerting any of his kind in the area to our presence who somehow didn’t hear the gunshot just now.

Ines’s loud, hoarse sigh is the perfect manifestation of our combined chagrin.  I pick her up and demand a performance from my injury-riddled body that verges on the miraculous.  My legs pump up and down as we flee deeper into the forest. As we go, Ines snatches my pistol from its holster on my belt and reloads on the run, and I have this horrific momentary vision of her shooting me in the chin by accident as she bounces up and down in my arms.  She twists and angles herself over my right shoulder, holding onto me with her other hand as she points the gun at the dark, scampering targets moving swiftly through the fog.

The trees fly past me, and I try to control my breathing.  After a few seconds, I try to decide where exactly I’m running, and I can’t think of any suitable options.  There’s only forest around us, and even without the mist, there would only be more trees in every direction.  I have no clue where we are, what state, county, or nature preserve this might be, whether there’s a river or cliff ahead, or just more forest.  We brush past a low-hanging branch, which scratches Ines and catches on my bike armor. The twigs break without slowing us down, but I feel a tearing sensation as the armor pulls away from my side, reopening the wound on my torso.  It must have clotted together like that last night, and now I’m leaking again. I suppose I should just give up on that getting better anytime soon.

Ines screams and ducks, which causes me to flinch and pull my head down as much as I can.  Something whistles over, so close that I can feel the air displacement against my ear. It thuds into a tree, and as we pass I see more clearly the axe-like weapon carved from a femur bone.  The hollering and whooping comes from behind, the left, and the right, and Ines fires off a few rounds. A shriek of pain rings out, drowned out by the heavy, thundering footfalls we now hear.  A crackle and hiss of branches and leaves echoes through the fog-filled forest – they’re in the trees above us now, too.

A female drops from above and lands just a few meters to our right.  I veer left and Ines spins deftly in my arms, putting two rounds into her chest.  I’m about to ask her how close the rest of them are in between my ragged breaths, but without any warning, I take one more step and my foot finds nothing but air and coiled vegetation.  Unable to catch us, we tumble forward. I practically throw Ines to make sure I don’t land on top of her, and she hits the ground roughly in front of me. Amidst the sounds of us rolling and slipping down the muddy hill, Ines calls to me, but I can’t respond with anything more than a loud grunt in between impacts with the earth.  Above and behind, the mutants regroup, then charge down the hill after us.

Slamming to a halting stop against a decaying log, all the air is forced from my lungs, and I gasp.  Trying to stand up feels like there’s a hundred pounds pressing down on my back and shoulders, and my vision is hazy.  I realize that my face is covered with mud, so I wipe it off with my sleeve, smearing it all over my cheeks and forehead but clearing my eyes enough to keep moving.

“Don’t stop…” I tell my tired muscles.  “Can’t stop…”

My body continues to unwillingly obey my brain and will, and I look around for Ines.  She’s staggering forward, limping and yelling in angry pain with each step on her swollen ankle, and my eyes dilate enough to see that she’s headed for a break in the trees leading to God-knows-where away from the crowd of hungry, possessive cannibals.

It takes one more gasping lunge, but I heave myself into a relatively upright position, enough to wobble after her.  Behind me, another tan-colored female lands, but her lack of proper clothing makes her vulnerable to the thorn bush I narrowly missed in my tumble.  She shrieks, reels, and turns back. In my effort to vault over the log I hit, my foot slips and I fall back down onto it again, realizing that the moss-covered wood is slick with my blood.  My face feels a little cold, and I’m losing feeling in my fingertips.

“No…” I murmur, my voice barely audible over the thump-thump of my weary heart.  “Not without her…”

It seems to take me far longer than is reasonable, even in my current condition, but I make it over the log and stammer out into the clearing where Ines has brought herself.  The trees break away to reveal a large, mostly empty riverbed. I feel like I’m running in water or gel, but it’s sand soaking up my red life as I stumble like a drunk over to where she’s fallen in the middle of the trickle that’s left of the river, unable to force herself back up on her ankle even once more.

“Matt…” she winces, clutching her leg.  “Can...can you walk?”

I give her an insulted glare.  She clutches my slippery hand, the water on hers washing away some of the blood on mine.

“You...have to leave me…”

The statement makes me want to slap her, and if I wasn’t so debilitated, I might very well do just that.  Instead, I just give her the same narrow-browed, skeptic look as before.

“I mean it!” she cries.  “You can’t...don’t stay just for me!”

I snatch the gun from beside her, plucking also the .22 from her belt, reloading both. The mutants have reached the bottom of the hill and are leaping out of the trees.  The first ones are only seconds away. Behind them, emerging from the shadows of the fog, the imposing, marked bulk strides forward, holding my katana at the head of his pack.  Scar-Face is here to claim final victory, and neither of us has the power to stop him.

“Not in a million years,” I conclude.  It makes her furious.

“No!  Matt! I won’t let you—!”

“INES!  Shut your DAMN MOUTH!” I yell at her, raising both pistols and yanking my leg out of her grasp.  If I’m going to die here, I’m going out with a fight, and it will be all for her.

I pull the triggers as fast as I can.  That’s four down. The magazines are out, no time to reload.  Both guns are hurled headlong at one of them, and he actually goes down. My short sword claims him, then two more, just barely in the right place at the right time.  I have to go for vital areas, the throat, face, eyes, and thighs. A bone-club whistles through the air, and I move my head out of the way, the blow glancing off my padded shoulder.  I snatch it to keep it on one side, then plunge my sword in along the mutant’s clavicle, yanking it out and being drenched in his red spray. This is going to be the Harvester all over again, except I don’t plan on making out of this one.

Something hits me right in my injured side, and I scream as I’m tossed backward.  At first, I’m sure it’s Scar-Face, but it isn’t. The lean male lands on top of me, and I hold his neck with my free hand while bringing the blade back across, through his mouth, removing his jaw.  I leave him to wallow in agony and roll, narrowly missed by another of the bone-crafted weapons, this time held by a wild-eyed, crazy-haired female covered head-to-toe in bone jewelry. My first swing only bounces off and she comes at me again, now followed up by several others.  Something inside me cuts loose, and I’m not seeing straight anymore. I’m just swinging, trying to aim death at anything that moves. Behind me, Ines’s scream pulls me out of that only for a second, and amid the bodies I see scattering around me, one lifeless mass is lying on top of her.  She shoves it off, her knife buried in its chest.

The crazy, bone-covered female comes at me again, and I put all my remaining power into my final swing.  It shatters her multiple necklaces and takes off her head, and I collapse to one knee, my sword plinking in the sand as I use it to hold myself halfway up.  One glance up shows me Scar-Face, waiting by the trees, his narrow eyes watching us at the tail-end of our lives on this earth. Ines and I would both rather die than see her returned to him.  Looking back at her, I consider what I might be able to do to spare her from that fate, from bearing his children, from a life as one of his dirt-covered mates. She gazes back at me, pleading, longing for relief, but we both know that I will never make it back to her in time before I’m torn apart.  After being so short-sighted and blood-thirsty, the only way out of this for me is forward.

Scar-Face leans back and bellows with all his might and fury, and the rest of his minions rush from the trees, twice as many as we’ve already faced today.  All I can do is yell back and be grateful that I’m too numb from pain to feel them eat me alive. As a final act of defiance, I raise my blade and hope that one of those eager half-wits impales themselves on it, one last meager victory to cap off a short, brutal journey of blood, sweat, and tears.  The cannibal coming in first angles himself out of the way. Of course it wasn’t going to work – I should have expected my death would be as dissatisfying as possible.

The cannibal rears back and raises his weapon, a fibula topped with half of a skull, the world’s most grotesque ice cream scooper made just for my brain.  I expect to blink, flinch, something, as the end approaches, moments away, but I don’t. I just stare at it, one second stretched out into a hundred, there’s a strange noise in my ears.  A guttural roar rises in the river valley immediately to eclipse the noise of the cannibals, and the one posing in front of me leaves my field of view, struck by some enormous shape and hurled several feet, all twisted and mangled from the impact.  An angry howl from Scar-Face sounds, and then a deafening boom-boom-boom.

It takes me a moment to process what exactly I’m looking at, and yet a few moments more to bring myself to the reality that this isn’t a movie or TV show.  The incredible, earth-shattering thuds I’m hearing are coming from a shuddering, automatic, 50-caliber machine gun, mounted to the top of a pickup truck that looks like someone took it from the junkyard, then attached parts of other junked cars to it as armor plating.  Men dressed in camo and armed with smaller automatic, assault rifles leap from the back of the truck and pop out from within, emerging so quickly it’s like they were spring-loaded. The sound and smell of gunfire fills my senses, and I’m aware of the sensation of being dragged backward by two pairs of hands.  My body comes to a stop in the middle of the river, and another pair of arms are wrapped around me (I’d know Ines’s sweet scent anywhere, even through the aroma of gunpowder, metal, and exhaust).

The trio of vehicles forms a triangle of protection around us, and the men fill in the gaps between them, facing outward.  One of them approaches, my black short sword in one hand, a sheathed katana in the other. I’m delirious. He hands me my blade and wraps my fingers around it, kneeling down so that his squinty, Asian eyes can look directly into mine.

“If you die, it will be holding your weapon,” he tells me.

My mouth opens to try to respond to him, but nothing comes out.

“Matt…” Ines stutters, pointing at the truck that just ran over my adversary moments before.  Someone gets out of the passenger seat, and when the door shuts, the mark on it becomes visible.  It’s in bright orange spray paint, an “A” with an extra-long middle and a circle around the inside of it.  My mind flashes back to an orange sign in a ghost mall, and my eyes well up with tears.

“Ashborne...follow the sun west…”

The way the trucks came in – the direction opposite the rising sun!

We made it.

Ines is safe.  We’re both safe.

I can sleep now.

I close my eyes and rest my head against her as our tired tears mingle on my cheek.