Jim somberly led the way, his shotgun poking out of his backpack. The twins walked between him and with me and Kurtis watching the back, but our eyes did not shift forward until the church disappeared into the greyed suburbia. A few times Liam or Emma argued in French about moving back, and by then we couldn’t.

We marched on. We marched through the snow, the binding ash and howling wind. We hiked between hollowed townships, around crammed highways and twisting groves of decaying tree lines. We made it further north, stopping for the night in an apartment complex near the edge of an abandoned town. Knowing very little about Quebec, I only knew there were several small villages and townships between us and the evacuation area. We needed to pass through it all, and hopefully without succumbing to ash inhalation.

The next day, I decided to talk to Kurtis. Behind his mask and under his hood, the rabbit clearly wanted to speak to me about something.

“Alright,” I wheezed through my mask and gripped his paw. “What is it?”

Kurtis paused in his tracks for a moment, looking back at me. The area around us morphed from townland into open farms, leaving nothing but empty, dead roads. While I noticed this and felt reminded we both stared forward back at the other three in our group, the rabbit exhaled.

“Benji,” he exhaled. “Remember what happened last time we were with a group?”

I frowned and kicked a nearby empty can. “Of course, I remember. How could I forget?”

The clawing hunger in their voices, the awful smell that was worse than us and the depraved eyes twitching for danger. Especially in the mother with her daughter cub. To this day, I could still remember the desperation in their eyes.

“That group could’ve killed us under that overpass,” he lectured me. “We could’ve been mauled, or our masks looted, and where would we be? Half-dead under a pile of this shit?”

His booted footpaw kicked at a nearby pile of ash on the road.

“What are you implying, Kurt?” I creased my brows. “I wasn’t trying to give them charity. That was an accident and you know it.”

“I know it,” Kurtis repeated me. “I don’t want you feeling like we can help everyone. We can’t save everyone.”

Then came silence, save for the sound of the other three walking ahead by a couple yards.

“And?”

Kurtis exhaled, stifling another deep cough and hacking noise.

“S-Sweetie,” he rasped while I patted his back. “I don’t like how you…how you just offered them to join us. They could slow us down.”

I audibly huffed through my mask, withdrawing my paw from his.

“You don’t think I care about our survival?” I asked him as we continued to walk. “Of course, I freaking care. I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you about it, but…”

“No matter what,” the rabbit squeezed my paw, “I do not want to be left behind. We are not dying here because you or I need to be the good Samaritan.”

My eyes widened at him through the goggles, and I wanted him to feel my deathly glare.

“Neither should they!” I told the taller rabbit with disgust. “No one deserves to be left behind in this hellscape.”

I cupped my paw to my masked muzzle and sighed.

“Besides,” I murmured to him softly, “Jimmy and the twins ahead, they are not like those…animals we encountered last time. Olivia and Harold too. They were nice people too. We couldn’t just ignore them and live with that for the rest of our lives.”

“That all changed when they put our survival on a goddamn countdown,” Kurtis grumbled with each step we made. Sighing, he lowered his voice further. “Look, I’m sorry you feel that way. I just…don’t want to see us get left behind.”

“Say we are,” I proposed. “What would you do next?”

Before he could answer, he and I caught one of the twins glancing back at us. Their eyes looked away, but we knew they listened from the way their ears twitched attentively. Jim remained focused and marched onward.

For the most part, Kurtis and I had rarely talked to them. Jim pointed us down the right roads, staying silent. From his sniffling and jagged breaths, we knew he was staying strong. However, the fox twins Emma and Liam spoke French with each other, occasionally turning their awkward attention to us, particularly me and Kurtis whenever we were holding paws.

“Do you see something?” he asked them this time.

“W-What do you mean?” Liam shivered at another gust of cold wind. “I don’t see anyone.”

Kurtis mildly shrugged and suppressed another series of coughing fits.

“You’ve both been looking behind us for the past day or so,” he explained. “Is anybody…following us? Or is something bothering you?”

Liam widened his eyes and slowed down with his sister until we caught up beside them.

“It’s nothing,” he muttered. “W-We just…we…”

“You’ve been hearing us, haven’t you?” I groaned. “Listen I am so sorry. He didn’t mean—”

“Sure he didn’t,” Liam scoffed loudly and added a grunt. “I’ve got frostbite on my left paw, I haven’t slept well the past several weeks and me and my sister are orphans while—how do you Americans say it again?—all Hell is *se déchaîne* after the Eruption. And the first foreigners we meet want to leave us behind.”

“First off,” I frowned, “I’m from Alberta. He’s the American. Second—”

“Why defend this *connard*—”

“Liam!” Emma stopped and growled at him with a dejectedly curling tail.

Her brother turned to her and scoffed.

“Hey!” Jim suddenly growled ahead of us. “If you two are going to fight, do it when we get to the boats, please.”

“Jimmy,” Liam folded his ears. “One of them talked about going ahead of us.”

The larger mammal shrugged. “Didn’t hear, don’t care. Either way, rabbit, you don’t know how to get to Quebec City in less than a few days.

The tiger went silent, and I turned my attention back to the twins.

“Don’t blame them for what he may or may’ve not done,” she growled something in French-Canadian I couldn’t hear over the wind. “I don’t want to die here either. Nobody does. He only wants what’s best for him and his mate.”

My ears immediately heated, and Kurtis tensed while peeking away.

“I’m sorry for embarrassing you,” Emma spoke up. “I just…” he glanced away from us, and I raised an eyebrow, “I certainly never expected you two to act like a real couple and argue all the time.”

I gaped my maw open under the mask. “What?”

“Huh?” Emma perked an ear towards us. “What? You and your classmate aren’t gay?”

My eyes traveled past her down the seemingly never-ending road, before I shook off a small layer of the ash.

“N-No, we…are,” I shivered, leaning closer to the tensed rabbit by my side. “We just…we don’t like to be…out. You know, not like boasting about it or anything.”

Kurtis grunted a yes, but began coughing even more while trailing his eyes away from the fox twins. Of all the times for him to be uncomfortable about his sexuality to others, it had to be during the apocalypse.

Emma laughed. “Listen, it’s okay,” she smiled up to me. “It isn’t as controversial up here as it is down where you’re from, Kurtis. I know…or at least *knew* some who were…out and proud.” We stood silent for a while, until she asked, “So you’re from Alberta, right?”

I readily gave a bashful grin. “*Oui compatriote*.”

Emma suddenly began coughing and pulled her mask off to the detest of Liam’s glares.

“What? I \*cough, cough\*” she hacked, “I just need to take it off for a moment.” The young fox wiped her muzzle and sighed. “Pretty sure it’s an oven in there.”

I laughed, and Liam cleared his throat after a moment.

“What region? What township?” he asked me. “You don’t sound like a city boy.”

Before I could readily reply, we abruptly bumped into Jim.

“Oof!” Kurtis groaned. “Hey, tiger! Watch where…”

Jim held a paw up, and silently pointed at a nearby car on the road. We hurried as fast as we could without making too much noise from the cobblestone under our soles. The area was a desolate intersection somewhere between Victoriaville and our destination. It was supposed to only be a small township, so there couldn’t be any violent survivors. Right?

“What is it, Jim?” Emma whispered, leaning up to look down the empty road.

“Shh!” he hissed. “I saw something—”

*Klang!*

The car’s window suddenly shattered with tiny pieces flying around, soon covering the ground. Jim fell screaming and roaring as his bloody paw fell limp on his side.

“Oh God, oh God!” Emma shrieked. “Jimmy, your paw—”

“Get down!” Jim growled while gripping his bloody paw. “Get down!”

At top speed, I knelt down as Kurtis squeezed my arm. Metal shrieked against metal, followed by shouts echoing a stone’s throw away. I squeaked when one bullet ricocheted off the concrete near our vehicle, and a few more flew past.

“We saw you!” a booming voice, maybe that of a feline, called to us. “Come on out!”

Straining in utter agony, Jim’s working paw reached for his shotgun from behind and began loading shells in. A pool of red blood pooled leaked from his wrist down to the ground, mixing in with the ashen ground. Emma and Liam hugged each other desperately, her eyes looking away as her brother comforted her.

I slowly lifted my muzzle up to survey through the broken windows before Kurtis immediately shoved my head down.

“What are you doing?” he hissed in a whisper, gripping my wrist in his paw. “Don’t let them see us!”

“T-They already know we’re back here, idiot!” Liam hissed, still hugging Emma to the car door. “Jim, d-did you see how many there are?”

“Hmm, I’m about to find out,” he murmured under his breath, the gritting Bengal slowly raising his head up as more blood began to binge away. “Mm. Four—no, five of them. All have weapons.”

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Jim ducked down and pointed to something behind us. “See that building there?”

I turned my head to see the two-story a mere several feet away from the edge of the car. The front doors lay ajar, and an exit sign hung at the end of a short hallway inside.

“When I start shooting, all of you run through it to the back. Find an exit into an alley and go as fast as you can. Don’t stop once. Got it?”

“*Quelle?*” Liam gaped. “No, we aren’t—”

“You are.” It wasn’t a question.

“Where do we go then?” Kurtis asked in a hushed voice. “If we find an exit, how do we keep going?”

Jim perked his ears through his hoodie, then pointed his barrel ahead of us.

“Behind those men is a road which will bring you to the Great Trail,” he explained with eyes growing wider and more strained with pain from the huge wound. “Find a way to get back there, take the cubs and locate a long gravel road and go northeast along *Route Vert*. I-It’ll keep you four away—” *Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Steel screeched above us, and the sound of footsteps rang in my half-pointed ears.

“…away from the main highway. Don’t stop, keep going along it, and Quebec City will be found in less than a day. Alright?”

Kurtis firmly nodded. “What about you?”

To that, we looked again to the gun and Jim’s worsening wound.

“No. No, Jim. We won’t leave you behind! W-We can still—”

*Bang! Bang!*

“Look at me, Liam,” Jim grunted while glancing to his mangled paw. “I’ll be lucky to even shoot let alone make it that far without passing out. N-No, they need to be distracted, and this is…”

He began to lull his head down, but promptly flinched back up.

“Emma, take care of your brother,” the Bengal grinned his visible fangs through the more visible pain. “I-I promise to try and get to you if I can. If not…go and say hello to Newfoundland for me.” He cocked the weapon and stared up to the window. “God be with you four. Now go!”

In a flash, everybody ran as Jim emerged and began shooting in the marauders’ direction. We didn’t stop and sprinted inside the building, now a vacant café full of overturned tables. Gunfire erupted over our backs, and we helplessly watched as Jim fell to the ground bloodied and lifeless. Willing ourselves to look away, I guided Liam and Emma with me as Kurtis crashed through the exit door.

Several steps later, as we rounded a street corner, Emma suddenly widened her eyes.

“M-My mask!” she panicked between gasping breaths, “I-I dropped my mask back at the car!”

“Take \*cough\* mine!” Kurtis spoke up beside her.

As I was about to object, a loud ringing suddenly sounded in my right ear. Each step made only caused more pain to flare, and I forgot what I was about to say.

“Benji, keep…” a muffled voice grunted into my ear, “keep moving!”

Distant shouts came as the four of us hurried down an adjacent road. Particles of ash and soot kicked behind us, and my hood slipped off as my right ear flared more and more. Tears streaked my vision, but the pull of Kurtis’ holding paw helped guide me.

Everything blurred. My mind retraced itself between then and another familiar memory. Another group along the road, fighting for food. As fast as it happened, a voice drew me back.

“…Benji!”

I widened my eyes at seeing an exacerbated, shell-shocked Kurtis staring into my eyes. It was then and there that I finally noticed the hot liquid pouring down my right cheek.

“Benji, goddamnit your ear is bleeding!” he growled between several intense coughs.

Kurtis gently sat me down with my back against the inside wall of an open building. The rabbit quickly pulled out a bandage from one of our bags. As I tried ignoring the painful itching in my ear, I could see Emma and Liam near the entrance keeping watch outside.

Once more, Kurtis cleared his throat.

“Benji, are you alright?” he asked while tying up my bandaged ear. “We managed to lose those men. We’re right by the trail.” He paused before tightening my dressed wound. “A-Are you feeling bad anywhere else?”

I reached my fingers up and felt the crusting blood stained into my pointed ear. If I froze long enough, I could almost barely hear an audible hum.

“I…” I stuttered, my heartbeat still lodged inside my throat. After readjusting my goggles and stretching my fingers did I feel fine. “I’m okay, I think. My ear…it feels weird.”

The rabbit lingering over me possessively stroked my cheek. Moving my toes and numb arms, I slowly began to stand with his assistance.

“I…I think so too,” Kurtis smiled, lightly patting my back before suppressing more deep coughing fits.

My eyes widened. “Y-Your mask! It’s off!” I gasped. “Kurt, what’re you doing—”

“Don’t worry,” he murmured to me. “I gave it to Emma. She \*cough\*…she needs it more. Young and all. W-We’ll switch every hour or so.”

“B-But…”

“Don’t scratch your ear too much, alright? For me?” he spoke quickly, and I slowly nodded. “Good.”

“I think we better hurry,” Emma mentioned. Even in a dimly shadowed interior, and despite her covered mask, I could see evidence of tears hidden by her goggles. “We…might have lost them, but…I’m sure they’ll be looking for us.”

Kurtis bobbed his muzzle. “Agreed. Let’s move.”

Without a word, I walked beside him while the fox twins followed behind. As expected, the gravel path laid visible underneath a canopy of trees, with the Great Trail running for a long way. Kurtis still coughed beside me (and the noise of gunfire could be heard far away). Otherwise, the air hung heavy with lack of animal noises.

“We should go back,” Liam spoke minutes later.

Emma sighed, visibly shaking under her layered coat. “W-We can’t, Liam.”

“Jim could still be alive, *ma sœur*…if-if we can…”

“He’s dead, kid,” Kurtis grumbled, covering his muzzle with a scarf as he clenched my wrist. “You saw it happen, and I…saw it happen.

“But we can’t leave his body back there!” the fox barked a little louder.

“We don’t…” he hacked and licked his cracked lips, “We don’t have the time!”

We walked in further silence, with Emma and Kurtis switching the use of their masks every hour or so as promised. My eyes traveled back to them, and I almost confessed to them how I felt the same. Unfortunately, not only would it open their wounds more, but we couldn’t falter. The boats would be leaving in less than twenty-four hours, and none of us wanted to be left behind for God-knows-how-long until they returned for more survivors.

“*Sacrebleu*…” Liam muttered, hugging onto his sister. “Jimmy...”

“I know,” Emma whispered to him, sniffling audibly under her scarf. “I know.”

Placing his back on, Kurtis shifted beside me in an uncomfortable walking stance. I could hear his hitched breathing, as well as the whining noise emitting from the twins. My attempts to avoid the tension soon dissipated when suddenly…

“\*cough, cough, cough\*”

“Kurt?” I patted his shoulder. “Kurt, just breathe.”

Next came even more fits of coughing, except this time they didn’t stop. Instead they went on and on until the rabbit was left kneeling on the ground. Fear ran through my body like adrenaline at the sight of Kurtis’ drained face. After pulling his mask away, his eyes became strained red, and spots of blood inked down to his footpaws.

“Kurtis!”

End of Part 3 of 4