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It was the perfect time and place for an ambush.

A pitted gravel track unravelled amid sickly trees and undergrowth that devoured anything not strong enough to withstand it. The ghost of tyre treads in mud suggested the route had not been abandoned altogether, though the imprints had long since dried and hardened. The remains of a plastic bag clung to a branch that bent towards the road. Other than the cicadas that buzzed softly, all wildlife was either dead or elsewhere. Clouds obscured the stars overhead and the air was thick and warm and wet.

A mechanical whine interrupted the stillness and a vehicle rounded a bend in the track. Large enough to scrape the bark from the boughs, its six oversized wheels ate the gravel at a steady rate, kicking up dust that clung to the windows of a boxlike cab. Behind the cab sat a cargo bed with a ribbed metal frame over which a dull tarpaulin skin had been stretched and sutured to the tailgate to shield the cargo from view. Every surface of the vehicle was scratched and chipped and dented. Daubed in crooked white brush strokes on the driver side door was a name: Warspite.

Two male faces hung like orbs inside the cab. The driver gripped the steering wheel and scanned the few metres lit by the headlights as the vehicle bit forward. In the passenger's seat, his companion studied a map spread out on the dashboard, a sinewy arm resting lightly against the window frame.

The driver's lean fingers pressed against foam pads taped to the wheel. The darkness had been slow to arrive, but now it was suffocating him. He switched off the barely functioning A/C unit, rolled down his window and listened hard. Hot air buffeted his cheeks. Cicadas sang to one another in the brushwood. There was nothing else out there. His cap, faded by a lifetime's exposure to

sunlight and sweat, made his temples itch, but he kept it on out of superstition. He took a sip of water from the bota bag above his head before breaking the silence.

‘Ghazi?’

‘A marker should be coming up on your right soon.’ The voice of his co-driver was muted, unhurried. Liquid eyes followed the lines on the map. ‘After that it’s just another three kilometres to Verne.’

‘We should’ve made it before sundown.’

‘We’ll be fine.’

‘Not if they cause trouble.’

‘It’s a new settlement. They’ll want to keep things above board.’

The man at the wheel grunted. ‘Two things people are good at: selling themselves a lie and making stupid decisions for quick gain.’

His point made, the driver wiped the sweat from his palms and settled back in his seat. Some Runners thrived on driving at night, but he wasn’t one of them. The risk of attack wasn’t much greater, but now he had to keep the rig in low gear. The track was too pocked with holes to be able to put his foot down and trust his instincts like he would if it was daylight. And moving at a crawl was an invitation for slingers to throw their hooks onto the cargo bed and board them from the rear. All they had to do after that was lean out and slash the back tyres and the pantech would be a sitting duck. The crew was always expendable.

The hood trembled as the potholes tested the suspension springs. The heat from outside was rapidly replacing the recycled air in the cab, but the driver made no move to roll the window up. He wanted to hear the demons if they cried out in the night.

‘Where’s the marker?’

‘Just relax. There’s nothing to worry about.’

‘Sure. Jinx us, too.’

‘You’re winding yourself up.’ Ghazi rubbed at the white strip

of hair running from his brow to the nape of his neck. Then he pointed. 'It's there.'

The carcass of what was once a two-seater car lay in rigor mortis by the tree line. Every part worth salvaging had been stripped long ago. Warspite edged by without stopping. Shortly afterward the gravel ended and the truck turned onto a rock-hard path that sent shockwaves through the driver's arms. No rain in the area for months. It was clear why Verne needed water rations. He put his foot down and the whine under the hood increased. He wanted to cover the last stretch and be done with it. The optimism he'd felt when they'd set out had died at some point in the afternoon, along with one of their precious batteries. Two hot, dull days kicking their heels in a filthy nowhere town before taking the first contract that came their way, and then the old rig had lost power just a few hours down the road. The battery, an old lithium-ion roadster model, had drained its charge, so they'd had to switch it out for the reserve. Now he checked the meter. Down to thirty percent. They wouldn't get far if the delivery in Verne fell apart.

'Still set on the cargo?' he asked, one eye on the road, another on the sullen trees.

'Yes. That water's ours. The hemp we can trade.'

'Good.' He hesitated. 'What about the battery?'

'I'll take a look at it first thing tomorrow. Today was warm. It may just've overheated.'

'Verne's too small to have a repairs and spares yard.'

'We'll be okay.'

The driver's eyes itched. His arms were cramped and his neck was stiff. As much as he loved the Old Lady, he couldn't wait to get out. Up in the cab he could feel every bump in the road, and a full day of it was more than enough. He tried to ignore his reflection in the windscreen. Heavy brow, dirty tanned skin, cobweb veins creeping in at the corners of eyes with mismatched pupils. Above all, he was gaunt. Neither he nor Ghazi had been

eating well of late. But they were holding on. He pushed his cap back and rubbed at the stubble underneath. Sweat dripped from his temples. The eternal heat was its own brand of torture, but there were ways to mitigate it. Keeping his head shaved was one. In the long summer months, they regularly came across pantechs and other vehicles that had gone end over end, the driver in pieces against the windshield or thrown out face-first onto the road. People like that always had hair tickling their ears.

Warspite swatted more branches aside. Keeping a hand on the wheel, he fished around inside a pouch on his belt until his fingers closed around a small piece of root. As he chewed it, a stream of ice water trickled through the centre of his skull and his nerves died, replaced by an artificial calm that would see him through the next few minutes. He offered a piece to Ghazi.

‘Not now.’

‘Suit yourself.’

‘Lights beyond those trees. Electric.’

He eased off on the accelerator and the whine lessened. Ahead, two lamps hung from wooden stakes on either side of the trail and a sign announced their arrival in Verne. They squeezed through and pulled up inside the perimeter. The driver removed the key that activated the pantech’s system and looped it around his neck, then reached under the seat for the pedal lock and secured it before flicking the kill switches for the battery. He jumped out of the cab as a tallish man wearing a handlebar moustache and a bush hat strolled towards them. The barrel of an ancient rifle peeked over his shoulder. Lurking in the gloom behind him was a cluster of lean-tos, tents and shacks.

‘You Cassady?’

‘That’s right.’ He took off his cap and stared the man down.

‘How-do. Name’s Quentin. Welcome to Verne. We was beginning to think you was lost, or worse. But our spotter tagged you out on the track and morsed it in. We got him sitting up in a tree a couple hundred metres down the road.’ The man

stood with the confidence of a ruler in his kingdom. A thickness around his waist indicated that he ate well.

'Lonely job.'

'We all gotta do it from time to time. How about that cargo? Got everything we asked for?'

'It's all there.'

'Great. Cost us enough. Two boys. Just for a little rope and water.'

Cassady's eyes lit up at the hint of a contract. 'Water's scarce. You want us to take your boys to Souk?'

'Naw. We ain't got nothing to give you in return. We'll take 'em on a quad. It'll be hell for 'em, but that ain't my problem. Things are ugly enough around here as it is.'

'How bad is it?'

'We ain't having any luck. River bed's drier than the gap between a crone's legs. Hasn't rained since we last sent for a Runner, and we been rationing like you wouldn't know how. We dug a well and got it going, but it's an ornery son of a bitch. Ain't bringing up anything but black. Wouldn't even be fit to grease your axles with. Plus the stills are only capturing enough to wet our lips. But we'll turn it around soon enough.' Laughter leaked from the back of his throat and he eyed the truck that sat dormant on the track. 'Say, what're you driving there anyway?'

'A 939. Six by six, five tons,' said Ghazi, coming around from the passenger's side and shaking hands with Quentin. As a mechanic, he never shied away from reeling off the Old Lady's measurements. 'Just over seven metres in length. Around three high if you don't count the top lights. Armoured cab. Beam axle on leaf springs. EV conversion with manual gearbox. Brushless DC motor.'

'She ain't pure electric?'

'No. She's at least twice as old as any of us. We had to mod her after the gas ran out.'

'Ever think about trading her? We could use a machine like

that. Our quads don't carry nearly a thing.'

'Not a chance.'

'How fast can you get her?'

'She can edge a hundred on tarmac.'

Cassady offered a thin smile. 'Unlike whatever it was we just drove in on.'

'That was my doing,' said Quentin. 'I had some of the young-uns tear up the track with pickaxes. We was getting too many unwanted visitors in the night. Red carpet all laid out for them. And we ain't exactly got the hardware to drive off more than a few at a time.' He dipped his shoulder to show the rifle.

'Makes it harder for us, too, you know.' The beginning of a breeze touched the back of Cassady's neck. This was the good time, the few hours before the world woke once more and fire rained down from above. The cicadas continued to make their music.

'Sure, but you can handle it. A few holes ain't gonna stop you.'

'True.'

'You boys decided what you want to do with your percentage?' The settler eyed them with an eagerness that betrayed his hand.

'We're keeping the water. What will you give us for the hemp?'

'How much is there?'

'Our cut works out at a box.'

Quentin made just enough of a show of calculating a fair trade in his head. 'I can't offer you any food. We're all of us going to bed on empty stomachs at the moment.' His gaze flickered to Warspite. One of the plates along the side of the cargo bed was black and buckled. 'Looks like you boys've been playing in the wrong neighbourhood. What'd you say to a couple of sheets of metal? Nice and strong. I was gonna use them on my own foxhole, but it can wait.'

Cassady listened to his partner drag his foot across the dirt,

which meant he was on board with the offer. 'Deal.'

'Sure you don't wanna hand over your water? Give you boys a good return for it. Couple of new tyres, for example?'

'Ours have some life in them yet,' said Ghazi.

'Plus any items of clothing you want. You name it. We got ourselves a good guy in camp. Makes some durable stuff.'

Cassady spat out the root pulp. 'No.'

'Well. You can't blame a man for trying. You boys make yourselves welcome in the camp. Verne ain't exactly Prestige, but it's got diversions enough. Either of you want a boy? A girl?'

'Not today.'

'Let me know if you do. Got a few decent ones with us. And tell me if you have any trouble.'

Cassady narrowed his eyes. 'Why would there be trouble?'

Quentin grinned. 'Runners find trouble. How long you gonna stay?'

'Until tomorrow morning. Soon as we're recharged and ready to go.'

'You need us to hook you up?'

He was quick to shake his head. 'We'll use our turbine.' He didn't want to be in the man's pocket for anything.

'Well, we're pleased to have you, long as you want. Without the water we'd be in trouble. I'll get a few of my boys to unload it now.' He turned and whistled. Malnourished faces appeared in the dark. They were young, no older than sixteen, and their eyes were blank. They waited for orders.

'Do as these men say. Take everything to the store. If even one cask goes missing, I'll lay a beating on you so hard, the noise you make'll scare the maneaters away. You hear me?'

Quentin pinched the brim of his hat and wandered back down the main thoroughfare of the camp. After the boys had finished unloading the cargo, Ghazi climbed into the back and gave the faulty battery the once-over. Cassady ran his hands over the tyre treads. They weren't bald yet.

Ghazi poked his head out. 'It looks fried. I'll try to charge it, but don't hold out much hope.'

Cassady closed his eyes for a moment and quelled the spark of anger that wanted to take hold. 'How?'

'Can't tell. Pushed her too hard in the heat, maybe. Or it might just have been its time. Old model. Anyway, looks like we're running on a single until we find a proper town.'

'Wind's picking up, so at least we can charge the other one. We may need to leave at short notice.'

'You don't trust him.'

'That man is too accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed for his hospitality to benefit us.'

While Cassady worked a splinter from between his teeth, Ghazi took the wind turbine from its storage tube and set it up on the roof. He pulled the blades into position and fed the lead through an opening at the top of the hood into the cab and then into the battery. The vanes began to chase one another and the yellow LED winked on.

'When it's charged I'll try the other,' Ghazi said, closing the cab door and locking it. 'I'm going to see if I can find a book.'

Cassady smiled. When he wasn't behind the wheel or repairing the rig, his co-driver spent his time reading anything he could get his hands on. He was one of the few who still bothered. Books couldn't be eaten or traded or used as weapons. They were only good for burning. In the early years of the Change, the survivors had thrown them onto fires to make it through the still cold winters. As a younger man, Ghazi had gone into the dead cities in search of untouched libraries and bookstores. Cassady had put a stop to it when they'd joined forces. It wasn't worth the risk.

'Not hungry?' he asked.

'I'll eat when I'm done. I guess it won't take long.'

'Then I'll take a look around the camp, too.'

Ghazi nodded at the rig. 'Okay leaving her on her own?'



'She's all locked up. Meet back in ten.'

Ghazi ghosted between the shacks and disappeared. Cassady sighed and stretched his arms. He was beat, but the thought of the faulty battery wouldn't allow him to relax. He couldn't remember when they'd come by it. His memory was getting worse with each summer that passed. There had been a time when he'd only needed to hear a name once for it to stay lodged in his head. Now he was already struggling to recall the name of the head honcho of this pitiful camp.

A cough that started deep in his chest had him doubled over with his arms wrapped around his stomach. His lungs were on fire. After a minute of agony it stopped. He took a drink of water from his canteen and leaned against the hood of the rig. The road was getting to him. A few days in a larger settlement would be no bad thing. All he wanted was a river to wash away the lice, a warm meal that tasted of something other than grease and Cosinex, and a night of uninterrupted sleep.

He struck out along the main path that cut through Verne. The camp was quiet. Places like this always were once night fell. Only a fool advertised their position when they could no longer see well enough to protect themselves. Dwellings fanned out on either side: corrugated iron shacks, wooden huts, vehicle bodies, canvas bivouacs designed to be taken down in a hurry. Squat solar stills that were little more than a black tray with a plastic cone and a spout at the top had been set up wherever there was a free space to distil the water they had managed to collect. The air was heavy with sweat and incinerated plastic and illness. Few lights burned inside the shelters. As he walked past the doorways, he caught snatches of conversation. The water shortage was on their minds. Verne was vulnerable. He didn't hold out much hope for it. Setting up a new camp always came with a cargo full of risk. A lack of food and water, disease, infighting, flash floods, dust storms, the baking sun. They were a prime target for nomadics too. Virtually no defences to deal with, and Quentin hadn't even

put sentries on the gate. One guard watching the road from a tree house didn't cut it. A few men with rifles and bows could take this place. The settlers would be cut down where they stood and the dwellings would be razed. Cassady shivered. As soon as morning broke, they were getting out.

At the end of the trail was an old windowless substation that had been turned into a bunker. Behind it, pylon legs jutted out of the ground, rising to a height overlooking the station's flat roof. A lamp hung from one of the legs and a limp flag from the other. Two generators thrummed next to the squat building and thick cables disappeared through a small hole in its side. Loopholes had been hacked into the brick and a sandbag fortification, vacant now, had been set up on the roof. Next to the entrance was a crude metal barricade that could be dragged in front of the opening in the event of an attack. One of the boys who had helped to take the cargo from Warspite stood by the door, leaning against a crude pike with a look of boredom on his face. When he spotted Cassady approaching he straightened up and stared at him with cold interest. The Runner stopped and plugged a new stick of root in his mouth. The stench of Verne's latrine pits drifted over from their location in the forest. He spat a long stream of saliva into the dust. It wouldn't take a minute to walk over and take a look inside the bunker, but that would mean dealing with Quentin again. The man might not be so easy to shake a second time. The boy's hands wrung the body of the pike like it was a wet rag. Cassady winked at him, turned away and started back to his rig.

As he neared the end of the thoroughfare once more, he spotted movement near Warspite. It was too furtive and unsure to be Ghazi. Keeping low and on the balls of his feet, Cassady left the track and squeezed between a tent and a lean-to. The trees whispered with the wind, damping the sound of his boots hitting the ground. He peered into the shadows and recognised the rig's bulky form and the blades spinning on the roof. And

there, by the hood, the silhouette of a man. He ducked back behind the tent, blood pounding in his temples. Either the man was friendly or he was not, but he would have to find out either way. Another peek. Some kind of tool glinted in the man's hand. As Cassady watched, the man bent over, wedged it into one of Warspite's headlight sockets and yanked the cover off. A cold fury made rational thought impossible. Cassady fished the wad of root out his mouth and dropped it on the floor. From his belt he took a switchblade knife and snapped it open. If the thief damaged or stole the light, it could be weeks before they found a replacement. But if he made too much noise trying to take the bastard out, the whole settlement could come down on them, which meant they probably wouldn't make it out alive. He focused on the back of the man's neck, knife held in a tight grip, and covered the dead ground at a jog.

The thief spun around, eyes dilated with surprise. He had a scavenger's face, thin and hollow and lacking a conscience. He swung at Cassady with the sharp-edged tool and bared an incomplete set of brown teeth. Cassady stepped back, keeping his body loose and his eyes on the tool. The thief darted forward and swung once more, slicing the air as Cassady rocked on his heels. Before the thief could bring his arm around again and regain his balance, Cassady stepped forward and led with his elbow. The thief's head snapped upward. He grabbed the wrist holding the tool, plunged the knife into a bloated stomach and pulled hard. The blood ran hot and slick over the hands of both men. Cassady yanked the blade out, held the thief by the hair and plunged the knife several times into his neck.

It was over. The scavenger dropped to the floor, bubbles forming at the corners of his mouth, dust puffing against his cheeks. Cassady picked up the tool and cracked it across the back of the man's skull to make sure. He turned the body over, wiped the blade clean on his tunic and then rifled through the pockets, which were empty except for a fire steel. Light footsteps

sounded behind him and he spun around, the handle of the knife feeling inadequate in his bloodied palm.

Ghazi glanced at the body and holstered his pistol. 'Dead?'

He nodded. 'Where were you?'

'Watching from over there. You were too quick. You spooked him.'

'I didn't ask for a review.'

'Let's get rid of the body before anybody else decides to visit.'

They lifted it by the arms and legs and carried it into the forest. It didn't weigh much more than a child.

'Do we cover him?' asked Ghazi.

'No. We're out of here once the battery's charged.'

'First light, then. I'll check the maps.'

'Good. I'll give the Old Lady a once-over.'

Cassady rubbed his eyes and cursed the thief. As soon as dawn diluted the sky, they would be bouncing over the excuse for a road once more. There would be no sheets of metal to patch up the rig and no sleep for either of them. He climbed into the cab and took a blitz pill from the bottle under the seat. The miserable camp crowded the windshield. A few metres away, a body lay in the trees. He suppressed the urge to retch. Then he got to work.