

Damn. Firestorm was really blowing today.

Some days it wasn't all that bad—just a few smoldering ashes drifting on the breeze—but today was a rougher one. The wind was blowing hard and actual flames blew by, looking for something to ignite. Days like this, you either had to hunker down and wait it out or walk whichever direction the wind was taking you.

Today, I was doing the latter. The ground here was flat and largely free of obstructions. So, I was making good time—if only I knew where I was headed.

As if in answer to my question, that's when I came across a sign. Not a sign from a higher power telling me what I was still doing on this forsaken world, mind you, but a stone sign—one of those “welcome to so-and-so” signs that notable towns favored over the more common sheet metal variety.

With a little effort, I wiped away the ash that filled the carved letters: נצרת. Nazareth. I don't actually have any biblical knowledge. Apart from having heard Jesus called “Jesus of Nazareth”, I couldn't tell you the significance of the town, nor what role it played in history, but here I was. This whole region was like that, honestly, everywhere you turned there was something famous, something notable.

Well, it was. The firestorm took all the paper, all the wood, all the crops. All that was left now was sand, stone, concrete, metal, and a handful of us survivors, wandering about.

The sign was taking the wind face-on, which meant that there could be a break from the weather on the far side. I worked my way over some boulders and around it. Someone had laid a length of metal culvert along the sign's back side and built up a small wall of rocks beside it to keep the wind from blowing it away. The pipe didn't have a huge diameter, but it looked large enough that it might be possible to sit up inside.

I knelt at the opening and called into the darkness over the howling wind. “Hello?”

“Yeah, hello?” replied a voice, sounding groggy.

“Mind if I join ya?”

A pause before a shaky reply, “For a bit, okay, but not to stay. There's not enough room.”

“Yeah, okay,” I gladly agreed before crawling inside.

I pulled off my pack and rested my shoulders against one side of the culvert, my boots against the other. The pipe's lone occupant sat beside me, facing the opposite direction. I offered him my hand and received a strong handshake. Not surprising, really. Firestorm burned away anything soft. Only thing left were us hard-headed folk who didn't know when to quit.

“Achmed,” he told me.

“Frances,” I replied.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light from the fire blowing outside, and I tried to judge his age. I failed. He could have been fifteen or a hundred. Firestorm was great at burning away hair, beards, eyebrows. Ashes and sweat formed a paste that posed a challenge for the sturdiest scrub brush.

“Bad out there?”

“Visibility is,” I said. Some days the storm blew hot, and it’d scorch the skin right off your bones. Other days the flames were brutally cold. Today it was just relentless, like a sandstorm, ashes working their way into your eyes, nose, mouth.

“Find anything interesting out there?” Achmed asked.

I shook my head. I had no idea what I was looking for, but whatever it was, I hadn’t found it.

The man pulled out an open can that he’d hidden behind his arm. With a metallic scraping sound, he ate a spoonful of its contents. “Beans,” he announced before tilting the can my direction. “Want some?”

I declined with a wave of my hand. I couldn’t recall how long it had been since I’d eaten anything—nine months? A year? Time was hard to judge in the perpetual twilight of the firestorm. I hadn’t seen the sun in years.

“Yeah, not a lot of eaters left,” he admitted. “I’ve mostly given it up myself. “For me, I think it’s the nostalgia more than anything else ... happy memories, meals with family, that sort of thing.”

I nodded. Without a purpose, any happiness you could cling to was the best any of us could hope for.

“Just looking for a place to rest, really,” I said. “You know any—”

But he was already shaking his head. “You’re welcome to rest up for a bit here. I wasn’t gonna bed down for a couple hours, but then I—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “Even sitting for a couple hours would be great. I’ve been walking non-stop for ... not sure.”

I must have drifted off for a bit. When I awoke, I felt a little refreshed and the storm outside had died down. I yawned and thanked Achmed again for letting me share his space. I crawled from the culvert and strapped my pack back across my shoulders.

Without the wind, the cinders drifted down like big fluffy snowflakes. The embers it had fanned smoldered and grew dim, dropping the world into the darkest night we could hope for. I found my way to the road and continued on into Nazareth. I trudged through calf-deep ash for half an hour or so before I spied a pair of silhouettes headed my way.

“Fanny? That you?” called one.

“Carmen?” I yelled back, feeling a thrill of excitement. Purgatory—or wherever the heck we were—was a funny sort of place. It had still been packed with people when the firestorm started, but most disappeared soon enough, burned away like any other softness left on this world. But now, it was just left with us few. I didn’t see many people in my travels these days, but I did tend to see the same faces from time to time.

Carmen was great. Even after the world had gone to shit, she still kept her sense of humor. Honestly, each time we crossed paths, I’d been surprised to see her still around. Not that being able to laugh meant you were weak, but there weren’t many left like Carmen. Most of the damned were more like me, grumpy, stubborn.

I picked up my pace for a moment, but as the pair drew closer, I quickly recognized the other, the tall man walking beside her.

The tail and horns were a dead giveaway.

My stomach fell, and my first instinct was to throw myself between them, to give her a chance to run. I took her by the hand and pushed my shoulder against the devil, making small talk the whole time. “Hey Carmen. Good to see you. Hey, come with me ... I found some really cool—”

But no matter how I tugged, she wouldn’t change course, wouldn’t slow her steady pace. Damn that woman. She was more like a bag full of nails than any gal I’d ever met. She leaned over and planted a quick peck on my lips. Even after her lips were gone, I could still feel them, feel the ghost of their presence.

“Nah,” she said. “I gotta go.”

“You sure?”

She smiled and nodded like everything was a joke. With a flip of her hand, she gestured toward the devil. “My friend can stick around,” she added with a laugh.

Losing Carmen dropped me into a very dark place. Not that she was a big part of my life or anything, but if she couldn’t hack it here, then why was I still trying so hard? That and so many other questions—questions I had no answers for—buzzed around my brain as I trudged on.

I can’t recall much of the days that followed, but eventually, I found myself at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, sitting on a cliff’s edge in a cave that had been reinforced with cinderblocks to keep out the wind. Anna Lee Moses sat with me, listening silently as I talked about Carmen, the times we’d shared, how much I missed her already.

Anna was the softest person still around in purgatory—relatively speaking at least. A quiet girl, kind, always interested in what anyone had to say. She’d have been long gone if it weren’t for her dad, Luke.

Luke was the sort of fighter that scared fighters. He was all fists and teeth, a junkyard dog protecting what was his.

Or at least, he had been. Like Carmen, Luke had grown tired too. Now, he was at the back of the cave, digging a man-shaped hole in the soft sandstone. Even at the end, Luke had every intention of going out on his own terms.

“And then what?” I asked.

“What?”

I turned back to the big bastard at the back of the cave. “And then what? Yer digging yourself a grave, then yer gonna cover yourself up with stones, and then what?”

I didn't think he'd answer. I'd gone back to sitting with Anna and staring out at the sea. But he did, eventually, “I suppose I'll wait to be judged.”

Anna wouldn't meet my eyes. She never wanted to tell anyone what to do. “What about Anna?” I asked. “You don't care what becomes of Anna Lee, now?”

I watched as Luke laid back in his self-made tomb. He covered his feet with rocks, then his legs and his waist. I crawled back to see him one last time and he startled me with a vice-grip of a handshake.

“I do care,” he told me. “I'll always care, Francis, but I can't be there for her forever. Take care of her, okay?”

I thought about this for a long time as he piled rocks up on his chest. “Yeah, okay,” I promised, but I refused to help him with the last few stones.

Everyone has to draw a line somewhere in the sand, and that was mine.