Dead grass and trees. That was everything between us and Quebec City.

We’d left first thing in the morning and continued north to the border, the best sign of it being the road lined up with stranded cars and RVs on the same road we followed. Most were buried in half an inch of ash, their windows broken into bits and pieces.

Meanwhile, the main highway cut through crops and farmland long ruined by the early winter. Humid air blew around and against us, managing to pick up most of the powdery soot like the cinders from a fire. It did not stop dwindling either and mixed with premature snowfall. Both painted everything grey, including some of my facial fur. Kurtis’ too, making his normally brownish cheeks resemble white war paint.

As always, we clasped our paws together and stuck close. For warmth, comfort and protection for each other. It wasn’t common to find bandits or survivors like ourselves heading north too, sometimes in the opposite direction. I could count on both my paws the number of times we missed being mugged or killed. Heck, during one of our earliest scavenges near Middletown, Kurtis mentioned finding a small gas station just…littered with dead bodies. An ‘utter massacre’ he called it.

At last, I spotted a familiar sight.

“Hey, Kurt,” I pointed forward. “Check it out.”

The taller rabbit swiveled his head. “What?”

His goggles followed my gaze through the dim fog. Proceeded again by the permanent traffic jam of vehicles, came a large border checkpoint. A sign read, “US-Canadian Border Station. Please have your passport and necessary items ready for inspection” in bright letters.

Unceremoniously, we waltzed through the station and the other side, jumping a bit as a nearby power pole fell into the tree line. No guards, no alarms, and nobody to welcome us in any direction. No petrified bodies either.

Soon as we made it a mile, I spoke up.

“W-Welcome to Canada.”

Kurtis laughed morbidly, still holding onto my paw.

“Can’t w-wait to try your beer,” he half-joked, then leaned down to cough louder. “Do you…” the rabbit cleared his throat and eye-smiled down to me, wiping away a bit of saliva from his lips. I thought I smelled a trace of blood. “Do you know any beers to recommend, or tourists traps?”

“Dunno,” I shrugged, trying to forget about the crimson scent for the moment. “I’m from Alberta. I practically know as much about this province as you do.” I waited. “And beers in general.”

“Really?” Kurtis asked. “You never considered going to a bar in Montreal, flirting with some guys and comparing our beers to yours?”

“Nope,” I shook my head, causing some ash to fall onto my shoulders and tail. “Never thought about it, to be honest. It wasn’t until college I uh…came out. By then, my focus was getting my paws on a doctorate and…mmm, never mind.”

“What?” he turned to me. “What is it? Tell me.”

I blushed under my white cheeks, despite knowing he couldn’t see through the mask.

“Then I met you on that forum, and you convinced me to come here.”

“Oh,” he blinked through his goggles, and looked away in the same, sullen way I’ve felt for the past few weeks. “I…guess you owe me for coming here then, huh?”

To an outsider, I certainly did. If I’d never met him online and spent a semester abroad, I would’ve been with my parents in this apocalypse. Right now, Mom would be hugging me, and Dad probably patting my shoulders in Edmonton, or seeking safe haven in the U.S. state of Alaska. We’d be homeless, but I’d be there with them. I wouldn’t be half-starving on a desolate road, or have my footpaws soaking wet inside my boots, or be paranoid about shelter or food.

I remember seeing the news with my dorm mates as it happened, and it only occurred to us hours later that we missed classes. In fact, everyone missed classes that day and opted to watch everything going on. Even Kurtis, who spent God knows how much of his time being antsy about his grade, stood captivated in utter horror at everything on our screens.

Soon as the ash clouds reached Denver, panic spread everywhere. Not only were all flights to and from North America grounded, but California caught fire and reporters mentioned martial law being put in effect. The cloud reached the university days later, except by then the college barely functioned from lack of teachers and staff. Instead of following the US Army’s advice to stay indoors and wait for rescue, me and Kurtis left the city. He kept saying we wouldn’t survive there, and I believed him. And the year prior, the rabbit told me he’d love having me study abroad at his school, and I believed him.

However, it didn’t matter to me.

As a reply, I squeezed his paw and looked back to him. “Me? I don’t r-regret it one bit.”

“Not once, Benji?”

“Uh uh,” I shook my head, then leaned down to well away any tears.

Kurtis squeezed back and tried stifling another deep cough. “Me…Me neither.”

We neared another deserted township farther from the border station, overlooking a grayed lake. This one was less buried in the ash, maybe a millimeter or so, lightening our worries a bit. The village was just…empty.

Unfortunately, there were even less things to find. As the same with many other soon-to-be-forgotten towns south of us, the residents clearly fled for universal reasons. You could find it in the streets. I tripped on dozens of haphazardly dropped clothes, cub’s toys and newspapers on the ground, and Kurtis told me that the one gas station he had found was stripped of everything.

“Everything?” I asked.

Kurtis nodded as we trekked away from the limits, paw-in-paw and voices rather quiet.

“Everything,” he muffled through his mask. “The other places in the town were deserted as well. This post office had nothing, there were envelopes all over the floor. I guess the residents got tired of the long lines there and decided to move, huh?” Again, I laughed and squeezed his palms. How he could keep that terrible sense of humor, I wouldn’t ever know.

By nightfall we followed the grueling routine: Find a house and/or car that was secure and properly insulated. If it’s the former, rush into a nearby empty room, shake off the ash, eat, shit and listen to the radio for updates before cuddling each other to sleep. If it’s the latter, make sure it had no cracked windows or bodies, shake off as much ash as possible before crawling in, then eat, shit outside, hold each other and sleep until (what we presumed was) daybreak. With the latter, it didn’t help with no security or properly removing any ash off our clothes without bringing it into the vehicle.

For the night we slept hidden inside a bed camper whose truck was veered into a brick building. It was like the disappeared driver was distracted, and unintentionally rammed it on his way. Luckily the short bed remained undamaged and the small door worked after Kurtis managed to lockpick it.

“I know I’m gonna get the same answer,” I asked as we set up shop. “But how do you know how to do that?

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he sighed before resting back. “I wasn’t that good as staying away from trouble as a little cub. Mom…Mom moved away the moment I was born, and Dad didn’t give a crap what happened to me. To make it to college, I…did things.”

I decided not to press further, just as I had on the forums. After all, if the rabbit ever found an opportunity to tell me more about his life growing up, he’d tell me if we made it.

*No,* when *we make it*, I told myself. *We’ll get away, live our lives, and be happy again.*

I kissed Kurtis’ paw. “Good night,” I murmured, to which he replied with, “Sleepy hare…”

Still, I relied in my rabbit as a body pillow.

The next morning, Kurtis and I had ventured into a neighborhood of suburban houses north of Sherbrooke. It was quiet, and the only noise for miles came from our rasping and footsteps along the blacktop. As we searched and navigated the sea of uninhabited homes, a church caught our eyes. Specifically, the one draped in a large, white banner.

“‘All are welcome in God’s sanctuary’,” I read it aloud, turning to Kurtis and pointing at the mounds dotting the front yard. “Think we should check it out?”

“Might as well,” he placed a paw on my stomach and stopped. Reaching out his backpack, he carefully grabbed his hunting knife. “Just in case.”

I nodded. “Be careful.”

“I know.”

As quiet as we could, we hurried to the church’s pristine doors. Closer inspection showed moved ash/snow on the ground fanning away from the entrance. I silently pointed them to Kurtis, and he gave me a knowing look. There were others.

Gripping the knife handle tight in his palm, he grabbed the knob and twisted it.

The door creaked open.

“H-Hello?” Kurtis spoke up. “Anyone here? Please, we—”

*Chung chung!*

He froze and so did I. Pressed to the tall rabbit’s right temple was the barrel of a shotgun.

“You and your friend don’t move.”

I raised my paws in the air and so did he. The barrel motioned us inside and I turned to a grizzled, middle-aged Bengal tigress clutching the shotgun. Behind her, a bandaged male tiger of younger age held tightly onto a bat. Like us, they dressed in traditionally winter’s clothing.

“Close the door,” the tigress commanded, “then drop your weapon.”

Paws still high, I closed the door and I heard Kurtis dropping the knife. My ears flattened in fear at first, and my fur prickled when I turned to see the interior of the church. Two rows of pews, an altar and a stained-glass window overlooking the absent congregation. Well, absent save for the two tigers.

“Are you alone?” the tigress asked, staring at Kurtis in particular. “We don’t get many outsiders this way, stranger.”

“We-We don’t mean any harm,” I spoke up and pulled my surgeon mask down. All of a sudden, I sneezed but saved myself from covering it with my ash-covered gloves. “We’re just passing through and s-saw the banner.” Again, I sneezed and held my arms close.

“Benji?” Kurtis pulled his mask off and gripped my arm. “Are you alright?”

I sniffled and gave a faux-smile. “I’m good.”

The elder tigress, sighing heavily, lowered her shotgun to the floor.

“Jim, you can put the bat down.” she said to the bandaged tiger. “Tell your father and the others it’s fine. They’re friendly.”

“You sure?” Jim, I presumed, said with a feline huff. “Remember what happened last time—”

“Trust me,” she growled. “Tell them they can come on out now. And get the smaller hare some hot water from the back. Poor thing.”

I blinked. *‘Poor thing’? Wasn’t she holding a gun to us a minute ago?*

“All of you can come on out now,” the tiger hollered. “It’s alright!”

On cue, six more figures emerged from a door at the back of a church. A fifty-something Bengal tiger in a dampened sweater, two middle-aged caribou and two teenage foxes (male and female twins). Aside from the latter canines, they all were hugging me and Kurtis, praising the Lord while giving their names all at once. Well, I didn’t question it when ‘Jim’ begrudgingly offered me a glass of hot water.

“Thank you,” I smiled.

“Don’t mention it.”

I carefully sipped before sitting beside Kurtis in one of the pews and began talking with the tigress as the other survivors went to do their own thing. The caribou sat kneeling at the altar with their paws clasped together, whispering verses in faint French, and the other tiger in the sweater sitting beside the elder tigress. As for the twins, they sat against the wall wrapped in an elderly blanket. They watched us and spoke French as well, with bits of sprinkled English.

“My name is Olivia,” the tigress offered a paw. “You have already met my son Jim, and this is my husband Harold.”

“I’m Kurtis,” he shook her paw.

“Benji,” I replied, then sipped on the cup again before offering it to Kurtis. “Here.”

He drank tiny mouthfuls. “Mmm thanks.”

We sat and talked to the three tigers. Seeing how we didn’t know their stances, we omitted from telling them about us being together. Instead we went with the ‘classmates’ approach. When they mentioned their lives before, I couldn’t help but listen.

After the Eruption, most of the township’s population escaped east into Nova Scotia. Those who couldn’t/wouldn’t evacuate came here for sanctuary. Olivia and her family holed up in this church and joined with the parish in making this into a refuge. They managed to grab generators, food, water and enough to last the winter. A large chunk of the survivors succumbed to the hazardous effects of the ash cloud once it lingered to the coast.

Kurtis began coughing and groaned. “Is there a bathroom around here?”

“In the front to the left, but the water doesn’t work,” Olivia pointed.

“Fine by me,” he grumbled and stormed off.

Soon as my rabbit wandered in, Jim spoke, “He doesn’t seem nice.”

“He can be in the right circumstances,” my shoulders sagged. “We’re both just…tired.” Another sneeze escaped my nose, so I wiped it on my sleeve before drinking the hot water again.

“If you’re both looking for shelter, you’re more than welcome to stay,” Olivia mentioned softly. “I mean, we keep searching for food every week or so, and…it’s safer here than out there.”

Half of me wanted to nod. Instead, I shook my muzzle.

“Thanks,” I sipped again, “but no thanks. Kurt and I are heading to Quebec City.”

Olivia and Harold glanced to each other in puzzlement.

“To the evacuation boats?” he asked. “I thought they’d left a long while ago?”

“The last time I heard about evacuations,” his wife pressed, “the television talked about boats and ships sinking in New York and Boston.”

“They did,” I nodded grimly, “but they’re still broadcasting that there’re still some left waiting for survivors before they leave for Newfoundland.”

“How do you know that?” Jim frowned. “For all you know it could be for nothing.”

“We found an emergency radio,” I replied, “and it’s been telling us to go to Quebec City for a while now.” Olivia’s eyes lit up, as did Jim’s when I pulled it out and turned it on high.

My muscles and tail tensed. “What the f…?”

“I thought you said they were broadcasting?” Jim asked over loud static.

“They were!” I shouted with covered ears. “I swear they were!”

I hastily turned the audio down and we waited until a long beep came and went.

“What are they saying?”

“Shhhh!”

“The following is an emergency update. Instructions will follow. Evacuation ships and boats within the following locations have less than seventy-two hours until final departures to their respective destinations: Quebec City, Saint John—”

“Oh my God…” Jim murmured. “They are already?”

Olivia turned to her husband. “Harold…get the kids.”

As Harold grabbed the kids and spoke to the caribou, my thoughts flooded with disbelief.

“No, no, no, no!” I barked at the radio. Clenching my nails into my paws, my eyes darted to the bathroom door. “Kurt! Kurt, come out here!”

Kurtis stumbled from the door, zipping his fly up.

“Ugh, what is it that’s getting everyone riled…?” the rabbit froze. Like us, his eyes widened as we heard various cities being listed off.

“—not arrive within seventy-two hours. We repeat: the following is an emergency—”

Kurtis stomped towards the radio. “Benji? What the hell’s going on?”

“We need to go,” I grabbed my coat. For a moment, I smelled blood, then frantically shook the thought away. “They’re giving the boats three days until they postpone the evacuation efforts!”

“Postpone them…?” Kurt’s maw hung open. “Are you sure they mentioned Quebec City, Benji? Are you *absolutely* sure?”

“Yes!” I grunted, frantically zipping my coat and grabbing my bag. “Either we keep moving or they’ll leave us all behind.”

In a flash, the relaxed state me and the rabbit wore deteriorated away.

“What are we waiting for then?” he grabbed his bag and began zipping his coat up. “I don’t wanna die under all this Godforsaken ash. No offense.”

The female Bengal chortled uneasily. “None taken.”

Shoving the radio in my backpack, I turned to Olivia and her son by the pews.

“Thank you so much for giving us sanctuary here,” I smiled softly.

“We are glad to have helped,” Olivia shook my paw, offering me a saddened smile.

A sudden thought crossed my mind, and before I could stop myself, I asked, “Why not come with us? It’s better than sitting here and doing nothing.”

“Benji,” Kurtis cut in with a creasing glare. “Don’t.”

“Kurt,” I insisted with a tight grip on my strap. “There has to be more room for them. For God’s sake, they can’t just stay here—”

The female fox stood and raised a paw. “Me and Liam are coming too!”

“Emma?” her twin brother growled lowly. “What are you doing?”

“You heard them,” she growled back, pulling him up to his footpaws. “We have so little time left and need to get going before the boats leave.”

“We won’t make it a day without masks!” he reminded her. “The ash out there will kill us like it did *mère et père*.”

“Children?”

Our muzzles swerved to find Olivia and Harold offering them coats. In the back of the church, Jim could be seen throwing items such as food and water bottles into a few backpacks, as well as place on his own mask over his muzzle. Whether it be because of my suggestion or out of respect, Kurtis remained silent with me.

“Emma, Liam,” Olivia sighed, glancing between us and them. “You both heard it. You and Jim need to follow those two, and just…run. Don’t stop until you make it to the river.”

Both foxes widened their watering eyes, but it was the brother who spoke up first.

“N-No, we’re not leaving you!” Liam whined. “N-Not you or the Wilsons, or anybody!”

“You must escape to Newfoundland,” Harold pressed them. “You must be in Europe and away from here. As far as you can, child. You and your sister. Far as you can.” The elderly Bengal looked to me and Kurt with a stern glare. “The Lord sent you two here as messengers, and you will help them get here.”

Kurtis coughed again, so I patted his back and helped him up.

“Come on, Kurt, breathe, just breathe and let it all out.”

Kurtis coughed louder and louder before placing his mask on. Already his cheeks flushed hot and sweat poured down his cheeks, but he spoke up nevertheless.

“W-What about you? W-What about them?” he pointed to the caribou still kneeling at the altar. “I mean…D-Don’t…Wouldn’t you want to rather be away from here?”

Olivia heaved a sigh and held her husband’s paw.

“The Wilsons have made peace with themselves, and so have we,” she replied solemnly. “We will only slow you all down, and there is no chance for us in the new world. This is the end for us. Not for you or your…companion,” I blinked in surprise, “my son, or the twins.” She glanced to Liam helping his sister into a pair of snow pants. “Now…you need to go.”

“First though,” Harold nodded. “A prayer for safe journey. Come, children.”

Emma and Liam sniffled from under their masks and still stepped forward. I joined in while my ‘companion’ remained away for a moment.

“I…” Kurtis’ ears swayed as he shook his muzzle. “I’m not much of a believer…not after what’s been going on…but sure.” I smiled and held his paw firm as we hung our heads low in prayer.

“Lord, give us passage in these troubling times…”

End of Part 2 of 4