

Meeting a Fellow Survivalist

The sole purpose of the Vincent family car was to serve as a cooktop for barbeques on those rare, scorching hot days that only occurred eight times per week, when thick slabs of steak were overcooked on the sun-baked bonnet in less than a minute.

Much like the average human being, the family car was no longer capable of meeting the expectations of its maker, desperately serving in any way possible to prove its relevance in the harrowing race for survival. It had not seen a drop of fuel since the last of the kangaroos died out, around the time when most islands were erased from the world map. It was thus unexpected when the humming of a motor engine vibrated through the sweltering air, the noise pummelling its way through the quadruple-insulated windows of the Vincent family farmhouse.

Vroom vroom. Maya was the first to prick her tiny ears, pausing midway through smearing melted crayons over the kitchen tiles. She crawled towards the window, generating a rainbow slime trail of coloured wax as her chubby legs dragged over the concrete floor, picking up stray puzzle pieces along the way. *Vroom vroom.* The puzzle Nanna was attempting to complete for the ninety-fourth time was missing essential pieces, the static image of an unknown city losing both significance and detail with each round of completion. Nanna failed to hear the motor engine due to apathy and deafness; her irrelevant ears had fallen out of the race for survival long before her eyes. *Vroom vroom.* Midway through replacing a burst pipe in the bathroom, Ballina abruptly stopped tightening a rusty nut as the engine's insidious laughter echoed through the tiled room. She dropped the wrench as the colour drained from her sweaty face, scrambling upright to sprint towards the front door.

"Hold Maya back from the window, Ma!" Ballina shouted as she reached for the rifle propped up in the umbrella container, throwing open the front door and stepping out into midday heat. An unfamiliar white car was idling in the driveway, the engine left running as a well-dressed man stumbled out through the car door with hands raised next to his head, his wide eyes fixed on the rifle.

"What the hell do you think you doin'?" Ballina demanded, squinting against the cursed brightness of the unrelenting sun.

"I, uh," the man started stuttering through cracked lips, "I am-"

"Turn it *off*," she insisted, prodding the rifle in the direction of the car. "That stuff you burnin has already –"

“So sorry,” he said, reaching through the open window to pull the keys from the ignition. Quietness settled over the endless sea of charred red sand once more, a silence so loud it offered more anxiety than relief, unperturbed by the living or the dying, a stillness more infinite than Hell itself.

“Where you from?” Ballina whispered, her voice booming as she lowered the rifle.

“The city, ma’am,” he said, taking off his hat and giving a courteous nod.

Ballina scoffed, bring the rifle back up to align with the man’s wide chest. “Don’t you go bluffin. I *know* most of them cities have been under the surf for yonks.”

The man was fiddling with a small disco ball charm on his keys. “It’s the truth” he said quietly, casting his eyes down to the ground. “I was fortunate enough to make it onto the Ark.”

“Fortunate enough?” Ballina spat, sweat running together like rivers in the deep creases of her frown. “You mean *rich* enough to buy a spot on that bloody artificial island. I’ve heard about all the vegetable crops and fruit trees the lot of you get. Clean water and double-storey houses filled with stuff taken from museums.”

He became still, his cheeks reddening quicker than the sun could take credit for. Privilege was written in the angry blisters growing on his soft hands where callouses were expected, in the gentle curve of his beer belly when others were reduced to skin and bone, in the ignorance that radiated from him like the toxic rays of the sun.

“Please,” he whispered, failing to suppress a sob. “I have not eaten anything in over five days. My water ran out this morning. I saw your house and...please. I will die out there.”

Ballina's expression softened slightly, the tension leaving her shoulders as she dropped the rifle by her side. "I'm not like your kind," she said while opening the front door, beckoning the man to follow her. "I don't sabotage stragglers to guarantee my claim to first place."

"Meet!" Maya yelled, crawling towards the stranger with a wide smile, drool running down her chin. "Meet da!"

"Yes baby, you get to meet someone today," Ballina said, putting away the rifle. "This is Mr ..." she started, trailing off and glancing at the man expectantly.

"Just Hudson," he said, his car keys jingling in his hand as he gave Maya a small wave. She watched the disco ball glitter in the light, fascinated by the small piece.

Ballina poured Hudson a glass of murky water from the kitchen tap, watching him guggle it down with great urgency before refilling it.

"Is *Just Hudson* joining us for tea?" Nanna asked from her spot at the dining table, struggling to complete the puzzle with her shaky hands. "There should be enough steak."

"Steak?" Hudson asked with bewilderment, his chin still wet with water. There was newfound hope blooming in his blue eyes as he turned to Ballina: "Are you kidding?"

"Camels," Ballina said smiling. "Big, four-legged animals that live out here in the desert."

"*Camels*," Hudson repeating slowly, tasting the foreign word on his tongue. "How have they managed to survive?"

"Same way as we lot. They rely on the snow," Ballina said, opening the small, noisy refrigerator to retrieve a chunk of meat that she plopped down on the work bench.

Hudson cocked his head to the side, eyebrows pushing together in a frown. "You're telling me it snows out here?"

"The desert may feel hot right now, but it cools down quicker than you can take a breath," Nanna said from across the room. "The snow and rain fill up the creek. That's where Ballina normally finds em."

"They feed on the clusters of grass that grows there," Ballina confirmed, slicing the meat into thick wedges, seasoning it with dried grass blades before motioning for Hudson to follow her out the back door.

Humanity was a simple species to please, as happiness - without failure - was provoked upon fulfilling a primitive instinct that had gone unsatisfied for some time. There was nothing more to it. It was the sound of the juicy steak hitting the bonnet of the Vincent family car that made Hudson smile in delight, his growling belly excited by the prospects of a long-awaited meal. A gentle sizzling as the surface of the steak seared, trapping the mouth-watering juices in the core. A warm, savoury aroma that evoked pleasant memories of crunchy, caramelised fat dissolving on the tongue and the warmth of tender meat releasing bursts of flavour with each bite. A primitive demand for satiety, the only source of true happiness.

Hudson gathered alongside the Vincent family around the splintering dining table. Each of the four chairs were well-worn from years of use, loyal to its family member through the worst of times. Nanny sat down in front of the puzzle, pushing the pieces back into their box with a quick, disruptive wipe of the hand, while Maya was placed on a chair with armrests piled with three cushions. Hudson sat down at the head of the table, salivating over the steak resting in his plate. Ballina stopped halfway to the table, pursing her lips as she sat down opposite Hudson on an unfamiliar chair.

“Meet, dada,” Maya said once she had finished playing around her food, reaching her arms out towards Hudson, who had stopped chewing his steak to glance at Ballina.

Ballina’s stony expression momentarily cracked open like thunder escaping from blanket of white clouds, threatening to bring down an assault of rain. “He is not your father, Maya,” she said in a low voice, sitting upright before tucking the thunder back between the neat little clouds. “That’s Hudson.”

“Udson,” Maya repeated, watching him excitedly.

“So, where’s your family, Hudson?” Nanna asked quickly.

Hudson lowered his head, pushing his empty plate away from him. “Dead, ma’am. Malaria. It brought the whole Ark Island down to its knees.”

No apologies were offered, for *sorry* had been used so many times over the century its meaning had become exhausted. There was no reason to acknowledge humanity’s vulnerability and grief when all survivors were painstakingly aware of it, living each day with guilt, regrets, and terrible secrets.

“I need to go hunting,” Ballina finally said. “Before it gets dark.”

“I will join you,” Hudson said with great alacrity despite Ballina’s hesitant expression, her eyes meeting Nanna’s across the table. “Let me help, please,” Hudson insisted. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Your car might be useful,” Ballina said with a shrug. “It would make it much easier to transport the carcass back here.”

“You two gonna be alright?” Ballina asked Nanna as she stood up from the table. “We won’t be long.”

Nanna nodded. Maya had gotten hold of Hudson' car keys, giggling uncontrollably as Ballina tried to pry it out from her tiny, crayon-baked hands.

"Listen to her, cackling like a kookaburra," Nanna said with a chuckle, picking Maya up from her seat.

"A what, Ma?" Ballina asked with a frown, staring at her grey-haired mother.

"A kookaburra, dear," Nanna said matter-of-factly. "It was a type of bird. They would flap their wings and fly high up in the sky."

"You and your mythical creatures," Ballina said, waving her hand dismissively as she retrieved her rifle.

"It's true," Nanna choked, the hurt shining in her bulging eyes.

"Her mind has deteriorated over the years," Ballina whispered apologetically to Hudson as she shut the front door behind them. "She always makes up wild fantasies."

The sun was setting over the distant horizon, its insidious rays desperately trying to clutch onto the blue, empty sky like a tyrant ruling over wastelands after destroying a prosperous empire. The vehicle rolled slowly over the disintegrating bitumen, clambering over the incessant potholes. At first, Hudson thought the strange shapes on the horizon up ahead were *camels*. But the immobile shapes were familiar. Old, skeletal cars and trucks, scattered over the baking plains. The closer they got to the creek, the more cars appeared, parked parallel to the road, their empty headlights staring out towards the incomers with despair.

“Are there more people here?” Thomas asked, shuffling around in the driver seat. The glaring headlights made his heart beat quicker, his hands becoming sweaty on the steering wheel.

“No,” Ballina sighed. “Lots of people from the city used to park their cars here to camp near the creek. But when them blizzards started sweeping through here...well.”

“They froze to death,” Hudson whispered, going pale. “Why didn’t they go somewhere else?”

“You know it as well as I do, Hudson. Money matters. It ain’t about survival of the fittest. It’s survival of the wealthiest. Those people carried their entire lives in those cars. There was nowhere else to go.”

Hudson pulled the car over in silence, his hands shaking. The creek was only a hundred meters further; the stream strong enough that water was heard burbling over the limestone. The wind had started howling mere seconds after the sun disappeared, pushing against the car door as Hudson got out.

“We can wait on top of that hill,” Ballina said, pointing to the small outcrop as she shut the car door behind her. “The camels won’t see or smell us from there.”

But Hudson was not listening. His gaze was fixed on an unexpected feature next to the road.

A white flower sprouted from the barren sand like a lone lighthouse amidst the unfathomable darkness of an infinite ocean, shining brighter than the combined happiness of the stars or insidious fires of the sun.

“It’s beautiful,” Ballina breathed, staring wide-eyed at the delicate petals folded open in unrivalled symmetry. She crouched down low enough to run a gentle finger along the stalk, fascinated by the soft texture. “What’s the purpose of it?”

“Beauty,” Hudson said, mesmerized, before glancing up at Ballina’s hazel eyes and thick, brown hair with equal fondness.

“Why waste all that energy on looking *pretty*, when there ain’t enough nutrients in the sand to guarantee tomorrow?”

“I guess it would rather die quickly knowing its purpose was achieved, rather than spending a lifetime without achieving it at all.

“You can’t figure out your purpose when life’s nothin but a struggle to get out alive on the other side,” Ballina muttered, her hair blowing in her face as the wind picked, clouds rolling in from nowhere.

“What’s your purpose, Ballina?” Hudson asked, his hopeful eyes meeting hers.

Ballina got up abruptly, taking a few steps in the direction of the creek, her eyes fixed on the water. She started fiddling with the rifle, avoiding Hudson’s lingering gaze. His heart sank in his chest, knowing he had pushed her too far, too quickly. She could be both his saviour and his future, his reason to stop mourning the life he used to have, stop fretting over the terrible secrets buried deep within his chest.

“How much longer do you think before the camels arrive?” Hudson asked casually, steering the conversation back to safer grounds. He inadvertently stepped on the white flower, crushing the life and beauty out of it. “Do you see anything?”

“Family,” Ballina said softly.

“What do you-“

“My *purpose* is to protect my family. There are no camels. Just another creature my mother made up.” Ballina turned slowly to face Hudson as she continued:

“There’s only one type of animal out here that I hunt.”

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It was the sound of the juicy steak hitting the bonnet of the Vincent family car that made Ballina smile in delight. A gentle sizzling as the surface of the steak seared, trapping the mouth-watering juices in the core. A warm, savoury aroma that evoked pleasant memories of crunchy, caramelised fat dissolving on the tongue and the warmth of tender meat releasing bursts of flavour with each bite. A primitive demand for provide for one’s family, the only source of true happiness.

“The car?” Nanna asked as the two women and toddler gathered around the dining table in a well-rehearsed routine.

“Left it at the creek with all the others,” Ballina confirmed, sitting down at the head of the table before plating up the fresh steaks, cutting Maya’s into smaller bite-size pieces.

“Meet!” Maya yelled, her fingers pushing a piece of delicious steak into her mouth.

“Meet Udson!”