

THE BEST OF US

It's no game.

BY LEE HALLISON

Wind howled over blackened trees as Ginja picked her way to me over broken highway lumps. A tough cookie, the kind that sometimes broke. Hard to judge on the first day. On the other hand, soft ones didn't even get to try. Like the boy I'd refused yesterday? He had no idea the favour I'd done his sorry ass.

I train recruits for scavenger duty. If this one passed the first-day test, she was in luck. I hadn't always been a teacher, but I'd be god-damned if I wasn't a good one.

"Ears hurt," Ginja complained when she reached the bus. The wind out here was painful, a never-ending screech, as if Earth itself was moaning. The nearly useless helmets we wore had way-too-thin ear pads and faceplates that barely protected us from the sharp debris and swirling dust.

Faded lettering across the tilted bus announced "Panorama Tours!" Ginja set her half-filled sack by the left wheel. The bus seemed stable. Two wheels on the cracked asphalt, two in a long furrow in the bare median strip.

I swung my rifle butt into the Greyhound's door. The glass shattered. I reached in and yanked the inner handle. A musty-sour smell wafted over us as I opened the door.

The wind dropped as I climbed in. Ginja stepped up. This was the moment when some would-be scavengers freaked out.

"Look at all this stuff!"

Hand luggage was strewn in the aisle. Skeletons draped with decayed clothing slumped in the seats.

"Yes, a good haul." She'd do. I shifted my rifle to the side to let her by.

Vehicles sometimes hosted rats or feral dogs. This bus seemed empty, so I pointed the rifle down — but stayed ready. I wasn't about to break my track record. My trainees came back.

"Stinks!" Ginja pulled her faceplate back down. She reached over the driver's headless skeleton and yanked the window open.

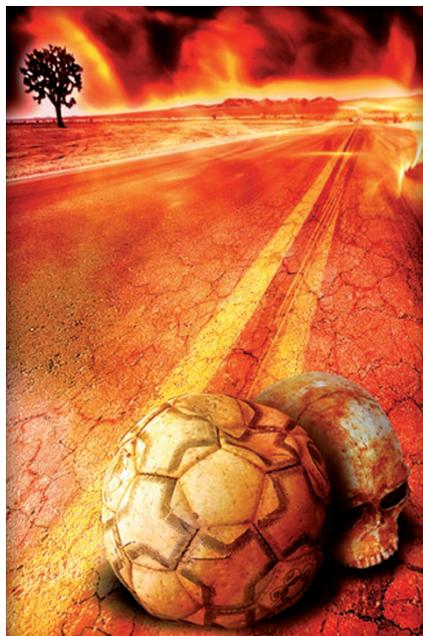
"Jeez, shut it! Are you stupid?" I yelled. She pushed, but the frame stuck. Now we were in a mini-windstorm inside a bus filled with dead people's dust. Maybe I was mistaken. Tough was good but smart was better.

I forced the window closed.

"Ask me before you do shit. Wind comes from this side. If you need air, open one on the lee side."

She nodded, worry that she'd blown it written on her face. I ignored her dismay and told her what to search for. I'd stay up front as guard.

"Batteries, books, all electronics and toys," I said. "Any medicines or creams, even open tubes. Clothing if it looks strong, check for quality — thin or torn-up stuff ain't worth



saving. Pass on food. It won't be good anymore."

"Even cans?" She unzipped a large athletic-style bag.

"Nobody brought food cans on tours. Use your brains."

She picked up a skull that was resting on a purse snuggled between two bony knees. Before I could stop her, she opened a lee-side window and tossed it out.

"Hey! No desecrating the dead. That's important."

"Surviving is important. Finding stuff to haul back is important. Where does giving a shit fit in?" Ginja stood, skinny arms akimbo, chin out.

"Being human, that's where."

She snorted but didn't throw away any more body parts. She worked quickly, tossing a mobile phone and a cosmetics bag into the growing pile in the aisle, then pulled a black leather duffel from underneath the seat.

A small "oh" drew my attention away from the windows.

Ginja held up a dirty white ball.

"Soccer."

"Yeah, so?"

"My brother played soccer. That could have been him." She looked at the seated skeleton.

I stayed quiet, letting her chew on the idea.

She set the ball on the pile. Gently, though, and her hand lingered. I looked out front, giving her space. I wondered, idly curious, if she would break this soon.

She coughed and pulled out a shopping bag, dumping the papers it held. I heard a scritch from the back and turned to see a fat furry shape streak over a seatback.

"Rat! Get behind me!"

Ginja jumped up and we swivelled around each other in the narrow aisle. The rats were fearless, vicious and carried disease our meagre antibiotics couldn't fight. I aimed the rifle and waited. Soon enough, it poked a head up and stared at me. I let it nose up higher and squeezed the trigger.

Ginja yelled at the echoing boom and we both fell back a bit. I'd seen the blood spray. I kept the gun aimed towards the back and motioned to her pile.

"Grab it, we'd better get out. Gunshot might bring the curious."

Her face was ashen. She stepped around me, squatted down and scooped her finds into the shopping bag. The soccer ball rolled slowly away and she looked up at me.

"Yeah, sure, get it."

She duck-walked towards the ball and grabbed it before it got too far. She squeezed it to her chest, her lip trembling. She jabbed her chin at the disarrayed skeletons.

"All these people. Oh, jeez. They're all people!"

I cocked my head.

"What did you think they were?"

She shuddered, stuck the ball in the bag and stood up.

"Stupid, I know."

"No, you're not stupid. It's hard to care and it's hard not to care."

As she reached the front steps, she turned.

"Cap?" She blinked as if something were in her eyes. "Do we have time to bury them?"

We didn't, but I was pleased. The best of us knew just exactly what we were doing.

I passed her, of course. ■

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