

Greysin's March

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The coarse volcanic ash caught in the wisped snarls of Greysin's dreadlocks and in the back of his throat. He coughed but it didn't help. It never helped. Ever since the eruption, the air had been tainted. Greysin reached back for his threadbare scarf. Twisting it, he secured the scrap over his nose and mouth. He lowered his chin and resumed his march through the dead city.

Ash-coated facades of abandoned buildings filed by him like pale ghosts. Greysin felt as if the empty windows stamped into the walls were watching him. In some ways he wished they were. It would mean another sign of life.

But Greysin knew he was alone. For days after it happened he had searched the city but found no other survivors. He only kept going, kept searching because it was either that or die, and he wasn't ready to give up. So he walked on, watching the ground and counting out each footstep as it was etched into the inches of ash that covered everything. He let all else pass by in a blur. The charred trees that lined the roadways, the dead cars crumpled against shattered gutters and the ash covered corpses of citizens still sitting within them. Sometimes he thought he could hear them calling to him, begging, pleading. Or perhaps it was his own ghosts that haunted him. He wasn't certain anymore.

Greysin halted. He lifted his head. He could hear the music again—his daughter's violin. The sound was coming from ahead. But he could see nothing through the curtain of falling ash. He rubbed his eyes. Ash dislodged from his eyelashes. Still nothing. He forcibly stopped himself from breaking into a run. He had been disappointed so many times before. But he was definitely hearing music—what if he wasn't going mad like he thought? What if this time it was real?

The song was faint—a thin melody. Greysin heard silent words floating in each note. He heard his daughter calling to him in the cadence of the tune, felt the strains of her music push past the boundaries of his grief and instil within him, hope.

"Daddy?" Her voice was barely a sigh against the silence of the city.

"I'm coming, sweetheart," he whispered, the words cracking over his tongue.

The music faded briefly but then surged, louder. Greysin broke into a tired run. She was waiting. He must find her. Would the others be with her?

An intersection materialised out of the ash and the volcanic darkness. The music stopped. The crossroad was empty, no footprint marring the ashy

surface. Just like every other time he followed the music, there was no one waiting for him.

Greysin glanced up at the streetlights that stood like sentinels at each junction. North. South. East and West. Four lights. Four compass points—one for each of the lives lost because his strength had failed him—his wife, his two sons and his daughter. Greysin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shut out the memories. Their screams as they had slipped from his hands, swallowed by the mudslide; the feral desperation he had felt as he dug barehanded through the slop in a futile effort to save them.

Greysin opened his eyes. He looked down at his trembling hands. They were broad and seemed as if they should be strong but he knew looks were deceiving. He hunched his shoulders and pulled his worn jacket closer. Once again ghosts had led him astray. He stepped out onto the roadway; ash shifted in eddies around his calves. He looked left and then right. Which way to go? Where could the people be? Left, he decided. He clenched his jaw. He walked on.

He almost missed the sound from behind him. It was a whisper against the profound silence that held the city. It had been so long since he had heard a real sound that it almost seemed unreal. He twisted on his heel, falling into a wary crouch. His fingers clutched at the service revolver he kept concealed at his side. It was the one he had carried back when being a police officer mattered. He pulled it free.

A black dog stood silently in the middle of the road. His lolling tongue was a shock of red against the impossible white of his teeth. His eyes were pale blue. Greysin shuddered, his own eyes were that colour. Greysin waited. The dog seemed to be waiting also.

The animal was thin and starving. But Greysin saw in its bearing the mark of a survivor. Even worn so thin, the dog was no victim to its circumstance. Its life spark was vital, bright—the dog, if he dared to believe it, was real. A sudden desperation gripped Greysin. He holstered the gun and reached into his pocket for his last precious scrap of dried meat. He held it out. The dog extended his nose and sniffed, testing the scent of Greysin's offering on the air. One step followed another as the animal approached with caution. Greysin drank in the details of him. The coarseness of his fur, the sprinkling of white across his muzzle, the faded red leather collar with gold tag that circled his neck.

The dog stopped a few steps away. He stretched out his neck, lips extended to snatch at the meat. The dog's teeth caught at Greysin's fingers and he almost laughed aloud in delight. Such close contact with another living creature was intoxicating.

With the meat secured, the dog skittered away. A snap of his jaws and the morsel was gone. He twisted to look back at Greysin, his long thin tail wrapped like a whip round his rear leg.

“Any more?” he seemed to ask.

“No more,” whispered Greysin.

The dog stood up straight, ears pointed forward. He stalked up to Greysin, eyes imploring.

“I’m sorry. No more.”

The dog seemed to understand. He looked up the street in the direction that Greysin had been heading. He pushed his head up into Greysin’s hand.

“Let’s go.”

Greysin reached down, lifted the dog’s nametag and thumbed away the ash coating it. The writing beneath was scratched but he could make it out.

“Your name is Delusion?”

The dog’s eyes seemed to glow as he held Greysin’s gaze.

Greysin smiled. He let go of the collar and began to walk up the road. Around him the city was dead. Its people were dead. The land was dead. But at least he had the dog by his side. Greysin kept walking, choosing to ignore the fact that the animal left no footprints in the ash as it passed. Let oblivion come. It made no difference to him anymore, because with Delusion by his side, the crosses of madness, grief and loneliness suddenly felt as if they would be easier to bear.

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