

**This world doesn't need no opera.
We're here for the operation.
We don't need a bigger knife (a bigger knife).
Cause we got guns, we got guns, we got guns (we got guns).
We got guns, you better run (you better run, you better run, you better run).**

**We're killing strangers, we're killing strangers.
We're killing strangers, so we don't kill the ones that we love.
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We're killing strangers, so we don't kill the ones that we love.**

Marilyn Manson, 2015
We're Killing Strangers, The Pale Emperor

June 15, 4:45 p.m

"What the fuck are you doing?" Stan yelled at Brian.

"I saw something move."

"If the idea is to bring home any stray horses, we don't want to be shooting them you idiot. Fuck, I knew it was a mistake giving a green kid a gun. Put it away, now!" Stan demanded.

"I just thought-" Brian began in response before Stan interrupted.

"I'd say you weren't thinking at all you fucking idiot. Put that gun away before I shoot you."

"Look, there's the horse," Nick yelled, pointing towards Ginger as the horse ran deeper into the forest. "Brian was right, but those shots have startled it. It's bolted further into the woods."

"Yeah, well, even a broken clock is correct twice a day," Stan quipped. "Don't let it go to your head kid. We've got to track down the damn thing now. You've spooked it with that itchy trigger finger." He paused to consider the next course of action. "Brian, your gun, your horse. Off you go. Nick will wait with the bikes. I'm heading back to town to report in. You've got about three hours until sunset. Don't get locked out."

Brian shouldered his rifle and reluctantly began trotting after Ginger.

"Nick," Stan began, "I've had all I can handle with that kid today, but make sure he gets home safe. My sister will kill me if anything happens to him."

Mac grunted at the sharp pain and then looked down at his leg. He could see where the bullet had hit him in the upper thigh but he had no idea how bad it was. His pant leg was shredded and already turning red, not good. "Fuck, I've been hit in the leg!" he managed to groan at Susie as he pulled the nylon shell from around his waist and began tying one arm of the jacket above his wound.

The men were yelling at each other and were all watching the horse fleeing the sudden explosion caused by the gunshot. Its echo lingered amongst the trees and bushes helping to cover Mac and Susie's initial conversation and reactions. Susie grabbed her knapsack and dug out their first aid kit. The previous quiet began to return quickly, however, as one of the men headed off after the horse and the others returned to the road and their motorcycles.

She leaned in close to Mac, keeping her voice subdued, "Here open this up and be ready to hand me what I need, start with the nitrile gloves." She moved a hand up to his cheek, softly stroking his stubbled face, "You'll be fine. It could be worse--" Susie paused, considering for a moment if she should continue with her thought, "--I could have been hit."

Mac looked sideways at her as she moved to a position over his leg and despite the throbbing that was beginning to intensify he smiled, "Yeah, love you too. Just fix my fucking leg already, ok." He immediately dug through the kit handing Susan the gloves and setting aside some compress bandages. He knew she would need some other items but he looked for the pain meds and antibiotics next. Finding the plastic vials labelled Tylenol #3s and Amoxicillin, he opened them up and rolled 2 tablets of each into his palm.

Doing his best to minimise his body's movement, he twisted slightly to reach the canteen attached to his knapsack. He took a gulp of water after popping the pills into his mouth. "Fuck!" he exclaimed again, more out of frustration than pain; although the pain was quickly building. He knew this had just sent their plans out the window. He'd be lucky to get back to their camp in a day or two, especially with the horse having bolted. Ginger would have been idle to carry him back.

As Mac was doing all this, Susie had taken her hunting knife out of its holster on her belt, she adjusted Mac's leg and had her first look at his wound. The area around where he'd been shot was red from blood. His jeans were shredded in a 10 centimetre strip along his outer thigh. If they were lucky, it was a graze and the bullet was not in Mac's leg.

"Do you want me to cut these or try and get them off?" she asked as she set her knife down on the pack beside her and put the gloves on that Mac had handed her.

"I've been waiting all day for you to ask me to disrobe," Mac said through a grimace. "If I'd known something like this was the ticket I would have got shot a lot earlier in the day." Mac took a deep breath, trying hard to keep his mind off the roaring pain emanating from his leg. "It hurts like hell, Susie. Tell me it's not that bad."

“Can't tell you anything yet. I need these pants off you.”

“Just cut them, I've got an extra set in my bag. I really don't want to take this off,” he panted, lifting the nylon shell. “I've tied it as tight as I can. Blood flow should be slowing by now.”

“Ok. This might hurt a bit,” she warned as she picked the knife back up and began slicing his left pant leg off. Her knife was freshly sharpened and cut through the material smoothly, helping her to minimise the movement required of Mac to cut around his leg.

The two men who had remained had returned to their motorcycles, their conversational voices indiscernible in the distance. One mounted his bike and started it up, yelling to the other, “Make sure you two are back before dark. I'll let the council know we're tracking another horse. The remaining man made himself comfortable sitting in the middle of the road by the two remaining motorcycles. He leaned against one of the bikes and took a pack of cigarettes out of his inside jacket pocket.

“There's a lot of blood but I think that's because of the size of the damage, not because something important has been hit,” Susie began. “Let's start with some pressure to make sure the blood flow is minimal then I'll clean it up and have a closer look. Hand me a couple of compress bandages.”

Mac passed two of the bandages to Susie. “If I were to guess,” she continued, speaking matter-of-factly, “the bullet lacerated your leg, passing right through the outer layers of skin and maybe some muscle.” She opened the first bandage and applied it to Mac's wound, pressing down and holding.

Susie could see him take a huge breath and his eyes widen from the pain. She carried on talking, trying to keep his mind somewhat occupied, “From a certain perspective, you're damn lucky. No bullet fragments to dig out. No bone damage. But-” she hesitated, “we're not moving for a day or more...not unless we can get Ginger back or get a hold of one of those motorcycles.”

The sound of the horse stampeding through the woods had faded completely, as had the man stumbling along behind him and the motorcycle that had departed. With the remaining man still out on the road, the two were still in imminent peril since he had at least the rifle they had seen. Susie glanced down at the crossbow. She could catch him by surprise and take one of the motorcycles. It was an option she would think about. Right now she needed to tend to Mac and get him back to the camp where he could heal properly. He was going to require some time off his leg and she knew it would frustrate him enormously.

“I need to clean this up a bit to see the damage,” Susie began. “Hand me a couple of wipes, a couple more compress bandages, the syringe, and your water.”

Mac handed her what she had requested and looked down at his leg. It looked like a laceration, just as Susie had described. That was perhaps the good news. The extent of the damage, however, was still unknown. The pain was excruciating. Depending on how much damage there was to the muscle, he was going to require some time when he would be virtually immobile.

He could only think of two times in his life when he had suffered somewhat similar injuries. When he had been cut by a skate during a hockey game and the night he had received his facial scar. Neither of those incidents had been nearly as painful. Perhaps it was due to the adrenaline and endorphins in his system during each of them. Hockey was always an adrenaline rush for him. And as he looked at Susie, he realised her presence had always created a pleasurable endorphin release.

Susie proceeded to clean the area surrounding the damage. Mac muffled his verbal distress as best he could but it was still noticeable given the still of the forest.

"We've only got one guest still around and he's a good way off but this is going to hurt. Have you got anything to bite down on?" Susie asked as she stopped her work and on his leg.

"I popped a couple of Tylenol number threes but I'm thinking some herbal pain killer might be in order too. What's the doc think?"

"Well, you know your body and pain tolerance better than me--although, to be honest, men don't really have any in comparison to women. Maybe you can hold off on that right now, though. We've still got company not too far away and unless you've got the smokeless variety--"

Mac held up a vaporizer and then proceeded to inhale deeply from it. He held the device out to Susie, winking at her.

She shook her head to decline in response. "I need a clear head to deal with this," she began, nodding her head towards his wound. "I've always found my anxiety just gets worse when I'm stoned. And I certainly don't need heightened anxiety given the current situation."

"I know," Mac started, then exhaled slowly, allowing the sensation of the cannabinoids to wash over him before continuing. "You'd prefer a nice Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot. Sorry to disappoint you, Madame, but all I have with me is this bit of single malt scotch whiskey." Mac held up his flask, smiling as best he could given his pain.

"Thanks," Susie stated as she grabbed it and opened it up, pouring a couple of ounces on Mac's leg.

"Noooooo," Mac groaned as quietly as he could. It was both a reaction to the sudden pain shooting through his body and the thought of using his scotch for his wound.

"Oh, sorry. Did that hurt?" Susie whispered, suppressing a smile.

“Of course it hurt but it was totally wasteful and unnecessary.” He held up the small bottle of alcohol from the first aid kit.

“I forgot all about that,” Susie responded, although her demeanour and tone said otherwise.

“This is the last of my 14 year old Glenlivet-”

“I hope it was at least 35% alcohol by volume,” Susie interrupted.

“Close to 60,” Mac responded.

“Excellent. Perfect for sterilising that wound. Just need to clean it up a bit. Can you hand me that syringe and your water now?”

“Can I trust you?”

“Don't be such a suck. You're lucky,” Susie smiled at him. “It looks like the bullet grazed your leg. It's a pretty deep laceration, but we don't have to worry about digging out a bullet. Just need to stop the bleeding.” She filled the syringe with the alcohol to sterilize it and then began cleaning the wound with the water. It was still bleeding quite badly but had slowed from its initial flow.

“Okay, one last application of water then I'm going to apply the clotting gauze. I'll suture you up later. How are you doing?”

“Hurts. A lot. Think I'll be able to walk?”

“It'll be slow to say the least. I'll need to fashion some type of crutch for you to try and minimise pressure on the area. You're looking at more than just a couple of stitches. I'm guessing at least twenty, maybe more.”

“There's that small trailer park about twenty kilometres back. Maybe we can make it there before dark?”

“No, we camp right here tonight. Let's let that clotting agent work for an hour or so. I should be able to suture the wound closed before dark. I'll reassess in the morning and then we can probably start back,” Susie asserted as she picked up the binoculars and focused on the road.

“You're the boss,” Mac reluctantly agreed. The various painkillers were beginning to do their jobs and he was in no mood to argue. “Do you want me to help with the tent?”

“Not at the moment,” Susie began. “Looks like our friends may be heading out, without Ginger.”