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And Your Name Is…

I don’t expect to find anything especially spectacular in the sporting goods store. I’m sure that when everything came down, this was one of the first places people went to loot survival gear. If I had to choose what I would loot from a sporting goods store, I’d grab a gun, as much ammo as I could carry, some MREs, and probably a camping tent or something. One sporting goods store I went to once had a set of ATVs right out front as some sort of promotional thing. Man, one of those would be nice! But still, a horse would be better – a horse doesn’t require petroleum-based fuel to run continuously. Maybe there’s a saddle inside the store somewhere, and also a way to easily carry the saddle until I can find a horse that might justify making off with it. I have about three and a half hours to find out.

The doors to this store also used to be glass sliding doors, but while the doors of the superstore on the other side of the neighborhood were completely removed and the broken glass scatted along the floor, there is no glass to be found on or around the doors to the sporting goods store, and the twisted, warped metal frames are still attached to the walls on either side. I give one of the frames jutting out into the middle of the space a gentle push, and it wobbles back and forth, creaking. It is dark in here as it was in the superstore, especially toward the back. However, unlike the superstore, there are large, floor-to-ceiling windows on the sides (most of them cracked or broken), making the expanse of trashed aisles and ruined furniture a lot less intimidating.

I stride into the main store lobby. My caution is slightly dimmed by the time safely spent in this area so far, and also by the sense of satisfaction I feel by walking through the doors of a sporting goods store allowed to take whatever I find that I want. Even so, I instinctively pause several times to listen for sounds from other living things and visually scan different sections of the store for moving shapes. I don’t really have a shopping list for this store, but I still have my list from before. I’m most interested in possibly finding thread and/or a needle, or something similar, but getting out of here with some quality articles of survival clothing wouldn’t be terrible either. Then, a thought occurs to me: if I find something like a sock or another piece of clothing similarly made, I could pull that apart and use that thread to sew my coat up.

Only half an hour of searching later, I find a lone athletic sock. It’s not black, but dark brown. Close enough. Now to find a needle, or at least a thin piece of metal that I can use as a needle. I start to think that finding a needle might be impossible…the figure of speech ‘a needle in a haystack’ comes to mind. What about a needle in a building that could hold a hundred haystacks? But this sock should provide me with all the thread I could need for quite some time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a lopsided sign: ‘Archery’. It’s a long shot (ha, ha), but maybe – just maybe – I can find a piece of an arrowhead or something like that, or maybe something else good will show itself. I keep an eye out for goodies on my way over and actually end up snagging two more socks (both different shades of dark brown, but there’s no reason to care about that) hanging limply from separate shelves along the way.

That’s when I see it. Just barely visible, catty-cornered right between one of the broken glass counters and an empty shelf, is a thirty-five-inch *compound bow!* I rush over, my mouth open in a stunned gasp, caution thrown to the wind, and kneel behind the counter, worshiping before my new find. It’s painted with a mostly brown and dark green camo paint job, which isn’t the ideal camo color for my situation, but still does some good.

The first thing I want to find out about it is if it’s intact and operational. I nearly choke when I see all the strings still attached to the cams on either end. My excitement grows even more as I find more things on this bow…the x-shaped jax string silencers on both ends, the draw weight set at sixty pounds (about average), and the quiver attached to the bow itself, which contains five green, four-blade, broadhead, carbon arrows! And of course it’s right-handed. In my wildest dreams, I could never have imagined finding something like this here and now!

I turn the bow over in my hands, and I see an emblem with words along the side. I tilt the arms toward the light and find the ‘Browning Archery’ label. I had heard something about how great Browning Archery products were back in the day, but then they disappeared into some other company, not that I care about that now. I have a brand new bow!

My next instinct brings me back to reality, where I am not a DC Comics super-archer. I briefly look around to make sure I’m not being watched before doing an enthusiastic fist-pump as I saunter back around the counter with my glorious new prize. I’ll absolutely be making time tomorrow to test it out, but for now I want to make sure I get home before dark. I can tell that is has become darker in the building even since I arrived – I estimate I’ve spent about two hours in here so far.

I give the bow a more cursory examination as I walk back toward the main doors. Five arrows…they’re a brighter color of green than I would need for camouflage, so if I use them for hunting or self-defense, they should be pretty easy to find again. I definitely want to keep my eyes out for more arrows, though. Maybe I’ll come back tomorrow and see if I can find some targets for target practice and also look for more arrows lying around while I’m at it. I just can’t believe my good fortune today –

A noise off to my left as I exit the building make me freeze and my head snaps in that direction so fast that it hurts my neck. I stiffen and take in a shallow breath and hold it there as I see the brown, humanoid shape standing in front of me. It’s one of the cannibals.

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To people who see them for the first time, the cannibal mutants now infesting the world may all look the same, but there are some subtle differences I’ve been able to pick up so far. I’ve encountered these creatures six times since this all began, and four of those encounters have been up close. The first three of those times resulted in confrontation, and each time, I killed at least two of however many were coming after me. The fourth time, I encountered a single mutant by himself, digging around in a pile of trash, and I came upon him, took him by surprise. We had spotted each other at the same time, and so I immediately pulled my sword out and charged him. He took off, making amusing, squealing noises of pure terror. So when I see this lone mutant standing in front of me, I know for a fact that it’s not a mindless attacking machine, that it has a self-preservation instinct that will kick in under certain circumstances.

It’s a male, and it’s like the average mutants that I’ve seen so far. He’s skinny, not particularly muscular, and he’s wearing what appears to be some sort of grass skirt-type of clothing. That’s actually more clothing than some of the cannibals I’ve seen up to this point – a lot of them don’t really bother with the concept of clothing or covering up. It’s pretty disgusting, especially with the females. He’s bald; all the males I’ve seen are completely hairless over their whole body. The hairlessness of the mutants contributes to the smooth sheen of their skin, which ranges from a pale color, to the typical flesh color, to sometimes even a ruddy brown (although I suspect that this could be because of all the time they spend sleeping and rooting around in dirt, mud, and other filth). This particular one is a pale-gray color. He’s shorter than I am, which is comforting, and he’s wearing some sort of armband. I realize after focusing on it for a few moments that it’s made entirely out of human teeth. Not so comforting.

His only other distinguishing feature is a large white mark down the middle of his face. I have no idea what it is or what function it serves, but it has the appearance of some sort of tribal marking or war paint. His eyes are the same gleaming, glazed-over orbs that still haunt my nightmares from time to time – no color, just white and gray. Even the irises seem sort of faded.

That doesn’t stop me from reading his expression, though. Even as I freeze in place and feel my muscles tighten as the adrenaline begins to pump through me, I can see very clearly that I surprised him just as much as he surprised me. We both stand there and stare at each other, those few moments stretching on and on like hours. His mouth is tightly closed, and he barely seems to be breathing, his wide, white eyes searching me, questioning. I wonder what could possibly be going on behind those eyes. What sort of logic or mental process does the mutant cannibal brain use to sort out information, communicate, or make decisions?

I have a few options here. I could pull an arrow out of the quiver and try to shoot him dead right now (it would be good archery practice for me), or maybe use one of my blades to take him out for sure. I could try to run for the house, but I’m not sure I want to display that sort of weakness when there’s only a single mutant here. I’ve seen how it’s possible for these things to be organized, so there’s a possibility that if I show weakness, this one might return to his pack or his tribe or whatever they are and inform them that the big man in the hooded coat is easy prey if they can catch me.

My stance is relaxed a little, but still poised to move if necessary. My left hand is holding the bow, but my right hand hovers inside my coat near the handle of my short blade strapped to my hip. He’s still watching me, and I can see the muscles in his lean legs tense and twitch, as if he wants to figure out what’s going on with me but still is ready to run. If I want to maintain control of the situation, I need to make the next move. I don’t want to retreat, but I also don’t want to be unnecessarily aggressive. If I can’t kill this guy, he’ll likely bring others of his kind to hunt me down.

So, I try something neutral – I speak to him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as calmly as I can manage.

The cannibal tenses at the sound of my voice but otherwise doesn’t react at first. He cocks his head just a little, shifts his feet, and makes a noise with his nose. I stare hard at him, as if I can somehow bore a hole in his face with my vision. His expression hasn’t changed at all – he’s still trying to decide what to do.

I take a step to the side, further from the doors and closer to the parking lot. He reacts in kind, a little startled by my movement, but his step to the side matches mine. Is he trying to stop me from escaping? He’s more bent over than I am…is that how he usually is, or is he about to spring? I’ve seen these things jump from rooftop to rooftop, or spring up and off of trees and the sides of tall buildings, so I know that if he wants to, he can jump the distance between us and land on top of me.

Still looking at me, he makes a few guttural noises with his throat, and I can see the blackened teeth. His pale tongue matches the hue of his skin. It doesn’t really sound aggressive, but instead slightly agitated. He makes another sound, a low, teeth-baring snarl, clearly directed as a warning at me, as he backs up very slowly. He wants to retreat and escape without initiating a confrontation. This is new. Perhaps he can tell that he’s outmatched. I’m sure that with all my gear and my coat and hood, I must seem much larger to him than I am without it. He’s already shorter than I am, and the rest of my attire adds to my bulk.

I relax my stance and face him with my hands at my sides, hoping to show that I have no intention of coming after him. I also take two steps back, trying to mirror his non-aggressive behavior. He makes a few huffs, kind of like an ape, and takes a few more steps back, and then, when he feels that the distance between us is acceptable, he turns around and takes off. His gallop reminds me of the mutated Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, how he bends over and uses all four limbs to scamper out of sight around the corner of the building, leaving me in the fading sun. And he’s fast, too. Gone in the blink of an eye. I hear his feet and his hands on the pavement from around the corner for only a few seconds after he’s out of sight, and then all is still again.

I let out a breath, one I didn’t realize I’d been holding in, and I can feel my adrenaline-fueled heart begin to finally slow down. I just had a staring contest with a mutant cannibal, and the encounter *didn’t* end with one of us dead on the ground. That’s going to be a hard one to wrap my head around tonight, and I’ll definitely be up watching for any signs of more mutants scouting out the area.

My pace is fast on the way back to the house, and I take several indirect routes that loop back around on themselves to be sure I’m not being followed. My ears are tuned for any unusual animal sounds. The sun is setting fast – by the time I walk through the front door, almost all the daylight is completely gone. I’m really glad I decided to head back when I did.

I scan the house for a few moments when I first arrive, and my mind starts to move tactically. Briefly, I consider exploring the basement, just to make sure that I know as much about the house as possible in case I need to defend it against a cannibal raiding party, but I decide against it tonight. Instead I rush upstairs to the bedroom and put all of my things quietly down on the floor, moving to a crouch behind the window facing the neighborhood. The moon is just beginning to peer over the edge of the horizon, and it’s a cloudless night. In a few minutes, I’ll be able to see a good portion of the landscape, but it’s the pockets of dark-spaced obscurities that worry me. I haven’t seen the extent of mutant intelligence, so I have no idea whether they’re smart enough to use the darkness as a cover. I know they’re more active at night, but do they go from one shadow to the next to hide their movements? It’s how I would do it, at least.

I spend about an hour by the window, watching the moon rise. It’s a little more than half-full, and I don’t know whether it’s transitioning into a full moon or a new moon (I haven’t exactly been keeping track of the moon cycles so far). Once, toward the end of that hour, I think I hear something that sounds like a mutant call, but I can’t be sure. It’s either too quiet or too distant to make out clearly. Eventually, I feel my eyes getting heavier and heavier, and I promise myself that I’ll wake up if I hear something coming.