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Unwelcome Clarity

 I jolt awake, realizing that there is light coming in through the window. I’m lying on the floor, the same place I was when I fell asleep the night before, beneath the window facing the neighborhood. From where I am, I scan the room and blearily listen (my eyes don’t work so well when I first open them up) for anything out of the ordinary. Birds chirping, wind blowing…everything seems to be fine.

 When I give a cursory glance at my pile of stuff near the bed, I see everything I remember carrying into the house in the dark. Like everything, it looks different in the light, even from this angle, so I have to take an extra second to look at it a little longer and drag my sleepy memory back into action. It’s all still here.

 I put my head back down and roll onto my back. With a snore, I breathe in and let it out in a moan as I stretch all my tense limbs out as far as they will go, like a starfish, pushing myself away from the wall in the process. As my hand scrapes across the floor, I feel the cold touch of the compound bow and I instinctively, lazily, grab onto it. I sit up and yawn and pull it over to me, looking at it now with curious purpose. I’m very interested to see what it can do and how it handles. My plan for the day – eat a late breakfast, practice with the bow for a few hours, search for some food here in the neighborhood while I scout around and get to know the layout, do some PT, and make my way over to the pharmacy by the end of the day.

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 The bow is a miracle. It takes a bit to get used to, but the recoil is nothing like a firearm. I’m going to have to practice some more to work those specific muscles, though. That’s why I spent two and a half hours pretending to be Green Arrow, then I tailored today’s physical training to focus on those muscles in particular. I also need to work on my aim – in spite of my own self-efficacy, I wasn’t able to accurately hit targets more than twelve feet away today, so I’ll definitely make more time for practice tomorrow. My mind wanders as I make my way down the highway toward the exit where the pharmacy is, and I focus on how my new weapon feels as it hangs from my left shoulder. I figured out a way to attach the bow to the left shoulder strap of my backpack with a carabiner so that I can just reach over and unhook it when I need it. I’m still trying to get used to the new weight, and the way it swings as I walk is a little bothersome. I may have to find another way to carry it if I can’t get used to it like this.

 It takes me about forty-five minutes to walk from my house to the exit, then another fifteen minutes to reach the pharmacy. I’m grateful for the calm day – the clouds are covering the sun, so it isn’t beating down on me as I walk along the asphalt road in the middle of the afternoon. I can still see it peeking through every now and then, so I can tell it’s about as high in the sky as it’s going to get. I have almost five hours of daylight left, I realize, and I chastise myself for being a lazy bum and sleeping in so late. Maybe, if I really want to keep searching out here, I can find someplace out here to sleep tonight instead of heading back. I risk someone (or something) finding the stuff I haven’t brought with me stashed under the mattress, but it’s pretty well-hidden. I’ll make that call when I get to that point, depending on what I find.

 I can see the pharmacy and its typical red and off-white color scheme from the intersection at the bottom of the off-ramp, down the street to the right. I stand there and look around. The bridge over the road is to my left, and between me and the pharmacy is a slew of other stores. Well, some stores, and some fast food places…I don’t think those count as stores. I have fond memories of leaving Fazoli’s in a gut-wrenching butter-haze after being unable to limit myself to just three of their carbo-licious breadsticks that I swear were literally submerged in liquid garlic. Equally prominent in my mind are all the nights spent at my friend Mike’s house, consuming one after another of Taco Bell’s variously similar products, which sat in my stomach like delectable rocks each night when I went to bed. At this moment, I’d immediately give up half my inventory just to get the calories that come from smelling that food from down the street, but it’s only a fading memory from a bygone era, just like my three-course venison dinner.

 The area looks pretty similar to the nearby neighborhood – a lot of broken windows, broken-down doors, and overgrowth on and in the buildings. Signs that once glittered with bright neon have fallen into a permanent, overlooked state of disrepair, the plastic logos and ads obfuscated by cracks and bullet holes. I see broken bottles and shreds of burnt rags littering walkways and parking lots, remnants of Molotov cocktails thrown during riots and, in the latter days of humanity’s downfall, clashes with mutant hordes. Along the way, I spot a black tire iron lying in the dry gutter on the side of the road. As I pick it up, I find that half of it is crusted over with a thick, brown layer of old blood. If it hasn’t rusted too much, it might be salvageable, so I slip it into one of the carabiners on my backpack and keep going.

 There are local animals everywhere. I keep looking around, hoping to see deer, my fingers twitching next to my new bow at the thought of putting an arrow through their heart or their head, but all I find are trillions of birds, squirrels, and rabbits. I suppose if I was really serious about finding meat I would try to get one of these, but I don’t want to waste my arrows or my energy since I’d likely not be able to hit any of them with my current skill level. I also see a fair number of cats darting across the street in front of me, and it takes my realistic paranoia a little too long before I start to wonder whether or not any of them were black. Regardless, I’m not about to try to eat one of those.

 By the time I reach the pharmacy, my stomach is starting to make noises that might be the beginning of hungry growls. I stopped expecting to find a real meal as a result of scavenging a long time ago, but there’s still an optimistic part of me that holds out hope of finding a perfectly preserved turkey dinner around each and every corner. About twenty minutes later, though, that semi-eager non-expectation vanishes from my thoughts and my mind turns to more practical, present situations. I pull out my shopping list to see what I still need, and I fold it back so that the big, crossed-out letters ‘M-E-A-T’ at the bottom don’t constantly remind my stomach why it’s still complaining.

 The first useful thing I spot while searching the pharmacy happens to be a small, overturned sewing kit. I don’t notice what it is until I’ve almost walked past it – it’s just a tiny pink plastic container lying open and upside down, but when I see the needle art on it, I immediately stop and reach out to check it for needles. I’m not disappointed – in fact, I’m elated, because I find *three* needles, along with a few mini-spools of yarn, colored red, yellow, and green! I hurriedly collect all of these things, stick them back into the tiny pink box, and then open one of the smaller zippered pockets of my backpack. As I move to shove it inside, I pause and look at the box. Pink is probably my least favorite color. Not because I’m a man (well, not *only* because of that), but just because I simply really dislike how it looks. I hate the color pink as a concept. But this is a good find, so I’ll only allow myself a second or two to mentally complain and grimace before I stick the box into its new home in my backpack.

 The store aisles are otherwise empty, or filled with a bunch of garbage – garbage not in the sense of otherwise good things I can’t use, garbage in the sense of true garbage: rotten food, moisture-laden pieces of cardboard, paper and plastic bags with the bottoms ripped open, empty and crushed soda pop cans, and other such junk. If I didn’t have my current inventory, I might attempt to make use of some of this with some sort of ingenious, MacGyver originality, but everything I’ve gathered to this point means that all of this trash is just…well, trash.

 I pick my way around a pile of squishy, smelly bags that have their very own civilization of mold and insect life sprouting amongst them to get to the pharmacy section of the building. I look through the teller window where the assistants would hand the customers their pills, shining my flashlight through the broken plastic to get a glimpse of what’s inside. I see several raccoon tails vanish, retreating from the beam into corners, and I pull out my short sword in case I have to defend myself from an animal attack. I smirk as I imagine myself fighting to survive an onslaught of furious raccoons. Rabies is nothing to scoff at, but I never imagined my life ending in an epic showdown with a pair of furry gutter rodents in the back of an abandoned drugstore.

 I don’t see much else from that angle, so I venture around to the half-door, which swings open with a loud grinding sound and stays in place because of rusted hinges. My flashlight sweeps the room several times – it’s dark back here, especially since the drive-through window is closed, and the light from the front entrance barely reaches back here. I see two sets of beady eyes from inside criminally incriminating masks peering around the corner.

 “Hey, guys,” I say in a normal voice. I almost want to continue talking to them, but I stop when I see something wedged in between two of the empty medicine shelves. It’s a big, plastic and cardboard case of bottled water, and it’s still half-full! I walk quickly over to it, the raccoons flinching with my sudden movement, and I put my backpack down quickly as I grab the sides of the box and pull with one hand, the other hand holding my short blade. The two medicine shelves seem to have been moved, and the box is partially stuck beneath one of them. I’m not going to get this out with one hand.

 I turn the flashlight back at the raccoons. One of them had taken several steps out when I turned the light on the water bottles, but he scrambles back to his hiding place behind a shelf, as if the light is painful to him. I set the flashlight down and leave it pointed at them, then I sheath my sword and put both hands to work dislodging the bottled water case. It still won’t budge.

 That’s fine. I don’t need the case itself anyway, just the bottles. I pull my Bowie knife from my belt and slice the taut, twisted packaging right down the middle as far as I can, then remove the water bottles two at a time, stuffing them into my backpack. I hear movement behind me and pivot in a crouch, my knife raised, but I see the two raccoons making their exit as fast as their little paws will carry them. They dash out the door through which I came and disappear. I wait for a second to listen, but all I hear once the tit-tat of their feet disappears is the silence I was hoping to hear.

 The water bottles are precious – I needed these very badly. Thankfully, I didn’t have to discard anything from my backpack to fit these in, but I might have to pick and choose from the supplies back at the house if I intend to move on anytime soon.

 As I stand up, I swing the flashlight to investigate the spot the raccoons were occupying and I raise my eyebrows. I know raccoons have weird collecting habits, but these little critters might have actually done me a favor. Miscellaneous items are all piled up in the far right corner of the room, most notably an extensive collection of lighters. As I approach, I notice that many of them have been chewed through, or the tops chewed off, spilling the butane out over the floor and rendering them useless. Several of them, though, appear to be in good shape. I pick up a handful of them and examine them to see how much butane is left inside. My heart sinks as I see that one after another of them is either all used up or has all leaked out. After looking at over half of them, I decide to pick up just one more and then move on, and this last one just happens to be completely full. I chuckle in victory, as though I just pulled one over on the universe, and I pocket the lighter, noticing the bad pun of the flame art on the side as I do so. I already have two lighters, but one of them is almost halfway used up, so it’s good to have as many in reserve as I can.

 As I was going through the lighters, I was also eyeing the rest of the collected pile, and as I get up to go, I poke through it with my knife. Lots of wrappers that have been licked clean, and a lot of plastic jewelry, too. Lots of shiny things, none of them useful. But then I stop and see what looks like an unopened package. I reach in and grab it, pulling it out, and to my utter astonishment I find myself holding a completely unopened package of **beef jerky!** And it’s not the one-time convenience store size, either – it’s a huge, thick package of it! “Bursting with MORE JERKEY FLAVOR!” is says.

 “Ohhhhhh…! No way!”

 A bow and full quiver of arrows yesterday, water and beef jerky today…what’s next? Will a deer have delivered itself mysteriously to my front porch and then just dropped dead while I was gone? I’m trying not to get my hopes up, but the last two days have been unusually positive.

 Jerky: backpack immediately. While leaving the store, my mind runs through the first floor of the house. If I remember correctly, there’s a fireplace in the living room straight back from the door. I also think I vaguely remember seeing some chopped firewood out back. If there is wood out there, I’ll definitely be making a fire this evening. I’m going to recline in heated comfort, munching on warm jerky, cashews, and some canned oranges, taking more than a few big drinks of water. Maybe I’ll find a bathrobe in one of the closets upstairs and wear it to convince myself I’m actually someone else – unless the robe is pink. Either way, today has been a great day, and I am going to sleep well tonight!

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 The sun is still fully above the horizon as I make the journey back across the highway toward the house. I anticipate that I’ll reach home just as the last of the round, golden globe disappears for the night, and I congratulate myself on my timing. All the excitement and exercise I’ve put myself through today has made me pretty tired, and I can feel my boots starting to drag along the roadway the farther I walk.

 The road is split by a grassy ditch that serves as a median between the two sides of the expressway. I trudge down one side and pathetically sigh when I begin to climb the gradual incline of the other, but I hear a sound that makes me halt instantly. A snarl from the other side of the road, up ahead at the base of the hill where the house overlooks the road, startles me enough so that I look, and I see movement from right on the other side. My eyes take in a few colors (varying shades of brown) and shapes (something that looks vaguely like a person), and I sink myself down below, into the ditch where I can’t be seen. I shrug off my backpack and reach into one of the side pockets, pulling out the rifle scope I carry with me. I peer through it and sure enough, right at the bottom of the hill, I see a pair of mutants.

 They’re naked, gaunt, and covered in thick, blackish-brown mud. One of them is male, and one of them is female. I can tell because one is totally bald and the other has grimy, mud-dried hair that hangs in thick, greasy clumps down to just below her shoulders. Whatever color it was before, it’s black now.

 They’re both side by side, bent over, facing away from me (which just about makes me regret the clarity of my scope), and their bodies are moving in rhythmic motions. It takes me a moment before I realize that they must be eating, with the way their heads are moving up and down and side to side. My stomach churns when I see a piece of the clothing from their meal, and I recognize it as the two rotting corpses I threw out of my house window a few days ago.

 “Gahhh…” I whisper to myself. “You are so disgusting…” I’m grateful I can’t hear any of the sounds coming from that direction.

 Even with their backs turned to me, I’d be an idiot to try to attack them from behind. I have no idea how many others are around, and I distinctly remember seeing that other cannibal in the area yesterday. Trying to figure out some way to sneak around them without attracting their attention, I glance around. This would be a really nice time to have a bunch of abandoned cars sitting on the road, but the empty highway was one of the first odd things I noticed when I reached this neighborhood. I’ll just have to be fast and quiet.

 I rise up and approach carefully from behind, making a wide circle around them as I prepare to sprint up the steep embankment. They’re both pretty focused, their faces buried deep in the open body cavities. I ignore the horrid noises that I begin to pick up as I get closer, hoping to use their bad table manners to cover the sound of my passing.

 When my feet hit the grass on the other side of the road, I take off as fast as I can. I have to reach behind me to stop some of the looser things attached to my backpack from jingling, and I hate myself at this moment for leaving the loose carabiners on to flop around. I keep watch over my shoulder, only looking forward to where I’m going when absolutely necessary.

 I make it halfway up the hill before I hear one of them shriek out. It sounds like an angry shriek, so I assume it’s about me. I turn, drawing an arrow and fitting it onto the bowstring for some on-the-job practice, but as my legs twist and my feet dig into the grassy hillside, before I even have the bow fully drawn, I can see that the female is still shrieking, and she’s furious with the male for some reason. They’re rolling around on the ground now, their muddy skin slick with the blood and juices of their food, as they mercilessly pummel one another with their fists and open palms, also making sure to rake their never-trimmed, yellow, fungi-ridden fingernails over each other’s faces like a bear uses it’s claws. I can’t even imagine what the fight is about, but when I realize it’s not about me, I turn back around and race the rest of the way up the hill, not stopping until I’m safely out of sight behind the corner of the house.

 It looks like it’s going to be another long night.