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Making New Friends

 The next morning I am actually able to wake up at the crack of dawn. When I open my eyes and see the first rays of sunlight peeking out over the roadway, I notice that a thick bank of fog is rolling in quite quickly. My hope is to make another journey down to the area where the pharmacy is located and try to find another place to set up camp for a few days. I’m not yet ready to completely move on, but I’ve sighted three mutants in the last two days, and one of them at least saw me and knows I’m here. If I have to move camp soon, having an alternate location somewhere nearby would be good, even if it’s only for one or two nights. I haven’t even come close to picking this area clean in terms of scavenging, and I don’t want to abandon a resource that’s so far proved to be extremely valuable.

 I also don’t want to leave this house without first checking the basement for anything valuable. It’s taken me several days of living here and I still haven’t worked up the nerve to actually go down those rickety, wooden steps. I’ve opened the door and shined my flashlight down there – I know it’s an unfinished basement because there’s a concrete floor and I can see some pipes and wiring on the walls – but I haven’t yet mustered my courage and forced myself to take that first step down. I’ve left the basement door cracked now while I’m gone so that it will require me to check it when I return for the purpose of making sure it’s safely empty.

 While I make the preparations necessary to leave, I let out a loud burp and I can taste the smell of the beef jerky I had the night before. There is indeed firewood out back, and I put it to good use, also finding a reason to tear another few pages out of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as kindling. Working to start my fire last night gave me a new appreciation for the extra lighter I picked up yesterday.

 I also took that time to use some of the water I’d collected (only a very small amount) to clean that blood-encrusted tire iron. I was actually pretty pleased with the condition of it, and I’ve decided that I’m going to keep it.

 But I’m not taking it with me this morning. It’s only a scouting mission, so I’m going to try to travel a little light. I’ll take my bow and arrows in case I end up out past the pharmacy and want to do some target practice, and I’ll also bring enough food for lunch. I can leave my medicine, the rope, the extension cord, the can opener, the extra clothes, the flashlight batteries, and some of the canned food here to lessen my load. I’m bringing just about everything else, though, and I take a good half-hour to ensure that everything of mine is safely tucked away around the second floor of the house. I make a note on one of the spare pages to where everything is, partially so that I can find it again, and partially so that if I die and someone discovers my body, they’ll at least have a lead on where to find a ton of stuff for their own survival. After I’m done patting myself on the back for thinking of others, I sling my pack over my shoulder, fit my katana into its place, and head out the front door.

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 Going down the road toward the exit, I’m paranoid about running into those two cannibals from yesterday evening. It keeps me looking over my shoulder and in every direction, especially when the fog overtakes me. At first, it’s not really an issue – I can still see the half-mile or so from my house to the exit when I set out – but within five minutes of its initial onset it turns into almost that pea-soup fog I always remember reading about in stories of sailors on the ocean right before they hit an iceberg or run aground on some sort of savage island. I can tell I’m starting to get twitchy at every little noise (even if they aren’t really there, and my mind is playing tricks on me), and I consciously regulate my breathing in order to slow my heartbeat. I need to be calm and focused, especially so that I don’t end up pathetically scaring myself over something that isn’t actually there.

 Still, my eyes dart from one place to another as the fog continues to thicken. A few more minutes, and it becomes so dense that I have to continuously look at the pavement in front of me, using the lines on the street to ensure that I’m actually traveling in the right direction. I’m starting to doubt that it was a wise idea to come out here with fog this thick…if I had known how bad it was going to be, I might have chosen to stay at the house instead until later on this afternoon.

 I take my eyes off the road for a split second, and then I see a vague shape in my path. I nearly gasp in panic and I drop into a crouch, my hand on the handle of my katana, ready to draw. But as I take a few moments to watch (and pray), I see that it isn’t moving. It’s right in the middle of the road, though, and the road has been clear ever since I’ve been in the area, so it wasn’t there before today. Slowly, silently, I creep up on it, instead drawing my Bowie knife, ready to leap out of the way if it should be some sort of threat. As I get closer, I see that it is not a human shape, nor is it tall enough to be a mutant or a person. It still isn’t moving, and it isn’t making any noises, so I assume it’s not actually a living thing. I stand up straight, my big knife still in hand, and I approach it with more confidence.

 My sense of safety evaporates in an instant when I realize what it is. The strange shape is smaller at the bottom and asymmetrically spreads out at the top. It isn’t until I’m right up on it that I recognize the pieces of the bizarre monument – a twisted piece of metal (looks like part of a car frame), so burnt that any color has long since vanished, has been driven into a crack in the asphalt road, just to the left of the center line. Onto this twisted metal has been attached sticks in various lengths and widths, branching out in two opposing directions like small tree branches. Four total sticks, two going off to each side, with pieces of junk (including half a pencil, a tennis shoe, a small rock, and a bag of feathers) all tied to different parts of each stick by pieces of twine, shoelaces, and torn cloth. But the hallmark of this ghastly shrine is the human foot, cut off right above the ankle, stuck upside down on the metal wreck as the central decoration.

 Immediately, I back up a few steps. I feel very vulnerable, and the sight of the thing (and my close proximity to it) makes my skin crawl and sends a shiver up my spine. I’ve seen “decorations” like this before. Junk creations punctuated by some piece (or pieces) of a human body. It reminds me of some of the more abstract art in museums or college, except that it includes evidence of butchery as its centerpiece. The mutant cannibals leave these around in areas that they are patrolling, occupying, or using as their hunting grounds. It’s a marker for other mutants to find and know that they are within their own territory. I look around me in all directions, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. These grisly symbols take various forms, but ultimately they all mean the same thing to me – time to move on.

 I pause and think for a moment. I’m already on a scouting venture, but this ramps up my timetable exponentially. I need to be gone *today* – before nightfall. At this moment, the prospect of continuing any farther into the fog when the cannibals have already staked their claim on this territory is more risk than I’m willing to take.

 Keeping low and sniffing the air for any hint of that nasty body odor scent, I carefully make my way back toward the house.

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 My stealth movement must be getting better; amazingly, I’m so quiet when I move back around to the front of the house that I see a deer standing on my front porch, totally unaware of my presence! Slowly, and just a silently as I have been so far, I ready my bow. Time for a true test of my growing archery skills. I set the arrow on the string, get into my stance, and slowly draw the bow back. The deer, which had been feeding on something growing out from underneath the concrete slab of the porch, lifts her head. Her ears twitch, but she stays in place as I aim the arrow right at the side of her neck, as close to the head as I can. I know it would be good to put one in her eye, but I’m not confident enough in my aiming to go for a target that small, so if I’m going to hit her, I want to hit her just below the jaw close to the throat, where she’ll bleed out and leave a trail I can follow to her body once she finally drops. I’d aim for the heart, but I’ve never been hunting before and I don’t know deer anatomy, so I’m not confident in that shot, either.

 I release with my three fingers all at once, just like a good bowman should. The arrow makes that familiar sound, whizzing through the air for just a second before I hear it embed itself in the deer’s soft flesh. I can’t believe my eyes when the animal spasms, the arrow jutting out from right beside its eye! I almost jump up and down for joy as it sinks down, still twitching and trying to right itself. One of its legs moves in a panicked running motion, but as the deer falls, its one working leg gets it nowhere.

 I set another arrow onto the wire and run up to the porch, drawing it back as I approach. I aim it down at the head, but the deer doesn’t seem to notice my coming. I hear the gurgle of its throat as it draws its last breath, and I breathe my own sigh as I stand there over my kill. If I was looking at the whole thing, I might chide myself on not hitting my intended target – yes, I killed the deer with a single shot, but only because I hit the head instead of the neck by accident. However, that issue is far surpassed by another, more important truth. The truth of MEAT! My mouth starts to water just looking at the body of the deer. I fondly admire its more muscular parts, as though I’m some sort of lusty man undressing a woman with his eyes. My stomach makes a noise.

 Then, my tense urgency returns, and my mind turns back to my overall situation. Somehow, I’m going to need to figure out how to get this deer out of here, or at least the best pieces of it. My heart sinks as I realize that this three or four weeks’ worth of wonderful venison meals will not be making the trip with me. At most, I’ll only be able to pack enough for a few days, having no real way to preserve it (and I now regret not looking more carefully for salt the past two days). I’ll have to spend about a third of the rest of the day dissecting the deer for the good parts and then I’ll probably throw the rest out the window as a symbol of my frustration. I also need to search the basement once before I leave, so that might happen first.

 In my head, I’m formulating the plan for how to cut up the deer as I walk through the front door, leaving the body on my porch after I’ve removed the arrow. I put it on the string and check to make sure it isn’t bent or damaged as I come from the front of the house toward the family room in the back.

 Satisfied with the condition of the arrow, I settle it on the string and look up. When my eyes rise above the floor level, they grow wide as saucers. I’m stopped at the front of the family room, looking toward the big sliding door that leads out back, and staring into the eyes of the mutant cannibal who is standing in the middle of the room!

 And he’s not alone.

 The next few seconds seem like an eternity spent in hell-grown terror. I’m able to count at least four of them, one or two of them still taking those last few steps through the back door and into the house. They aren’t the same as the ones I saw the day before – these cannibals are a smooth grayish-brown, mostly clean of dirt and mud. They’re all wearing those grass skirts and some form of human-bone jewelry as bracelets, anklets, or necklaces, and all of them have that white war paint streak on their faces. At least one of them is a female.

 Upon noticing them, I freeze in place, and all of them do as well. The look of surprise on their faces tells me that they didn’t expect to see me in here anymore than I expected to see them. We all stare at one another, unblinking, unbreathing, unmoving. There is absolute silence – the air has been sucked out of the room. Even my heart seems to have come to a complete stop.

 The expression of the leader in front goes from one of shock to inquiry, but at first he makes no sound. I notice the muscles in his arms bulge (oh, man, are those some serious muscles!) and that he is carrying something in his hand. The moment I see the makeshift club – fashioned from a femur, a skull, and several human *and* mutant hands – my own gloved fingers instinctively pull back on my bowstring. I become aware of myself once more, aware that I’m still holding my bow and an arrow on its string.

 The mutant leader’s eyes snap to my bow, and his brow furrows. He snorts, a deep, gruff sound, and I see his jaw clenched, his hands balling into fists.

 The bow string creaks with tension. The muscles all over the mutant’s hairless body flex.

 We lock eyes. His lip curls up.

 I narrow my eyes, and send back a silent snarl of my own.

 That does it.

 The mutant’s vicious screech pierces the dead silence. All at once, the rest of them join in the war cry, and all four leap forward in unison. Their powerful legs carry them all across the whole room, leaping over to where I am in a single bound. I raise my bow and fire as quickly as I can, hitting the lead mutant right in the pocket of his left shoulder. The club falls to the ground. He spirals off to the side and falls over a rocking chair, but the male right behind him lands in front of me as I take a step back. I drop the bow and my short sword is out in a flash. I swing and cut a long slice out of his cheek, spattering blood on the walls. As he recoils and I kick him back, the female darts in and leaps up, landing on my shoulders and grabbing for my face. The third male slams into me full force, throwing both me and the female into the wall. The three of us tumble to the floor, and in the confusion my backpack (along with my katana) is ripped from my shoulders by the crazed female mutant.

 The third male comes at me again; I swing with my sword, but he darts in and my blade only nicks the top of his head as he comes in for a tackle. I bring my knee up and into his chin and I see him spit blood as he falls back. The male with the cut cheek and the female both charge me again. I sidestep the female’s leap, which sends her into the wall, and then I retreat from the male toward the kitchen. He’s coming so fast that I don’t even have time to draw my gun from my back pocket, so I grab the partially open basement door on my way past and fling it wide open. The corner of it smacks the snarling male in the forehead, and I put all my power behind a kick in the middle of the door, which sends the cannibal behind it flying backward.

 Another one of them slams into it from the other side, which hits me like I’ve just been tackled by a quarterback and knocks me off my feet…right through the open doorway and down the rickety wooden basement stairs.

 I tumble down in a backward summersault, pain shooting through my back and shoulders, disoriented when I land almost upside down on the concrete floor of the basement. I hear my short sword clatter to the floor, lost to the darkness, along with my gun and several items from my belt. I struggle to breathe – the impact knocked the wind out of me. I hear the crazed, enraged sounds from above, and then a shattering crack as the mutants rip the basement door from its hinges. They’re coming for me.

 I scramble for a dark part of the basement, off to the right of the stairs, quickly seeing a small cubby hole beneath the staircase. The light coming from above is blocked by animated shadows as the mutants clumsily negotiate the steps in their sideways crouch, at least one of them coming down on all fours. I’ve lost my short sword, so I frantically feel my belt for my Bowie knife. It’s still there, and I pull it out immediately, steeling myself against the upcoming confrontation. This is about to get really ugly.

 The monsters descend and spread out – one comes my way, and two go off somewhere else into the dark on the other side of the stairs. Their snarls and growls make it easy for me to hide my fast breathing, but they right away start tearing things apart looking for me. One male, the one with the bloody mouth, approaches where I’m hiding, turning every which way, and he seems to think I’m over toward the wall, hiding in a big stack of cardboard boxes. The second his back is turned, I strike.

 I leap from my hiding place, Bowie knife held in reverse grip, and I sink the blade into the side of his neck, all the way to the handle. We crash into the cardboard boxes, which are full of old Christmas ornaments, but when I twist the knife and rip it out at an upward angle, I know at least this cannibal is no longer a problem.

 The female and other male are on me in the next second, flashing out of the dark with shrieks of their own. I spin out of the way, striking the female in the back of the head with the handle of my knife as she comes past and sending her face-first into one of the open boxes. The sound of the shattering ornaments mirror the kick to the ribs I deliver to the male coming at me, then the front kick I give him in the chin, adding more blood to the slit in his cheek.

 It doesn’t stop him. He moves forward into me, and I stab at him, but the knife sticks in his hand and leaves my grasp as he flails about, trying to hit me. A powerful uppercut from him sends me falling back, but as I scramble to get out of the way, my hands find a familiar object – my short sword!

 The male leaps at me and I roll out of the way. Predictably reaching for me, he loses a hand to my short blade, then loses his other arm before I make a diagonal slice that opens up his shoulder and neck. The female comes at me, having picked all the red and green shards from her face, and I’m able to dig my blade out of the male’s shoulder just in time to turn it in a reverse grip and stick it straight back. I hear and feel it enter flesh, then turn my head to see the red-stained tip of it coming out her back. I hear her gurgling last breath, then yank the sword out and turn to watch her fall dead on the floor.

 I stand back, taking in deep breaths, observing my kills for any signs of life. All three of them are unmoving…I’m surprised that I killed the female so fast until I see the hole in her chest that I put right where her heart is. Looking around the basement, my eyes rest on a familiar shape lying close to the base of the stairs. My .22 pistol is just on the other side of the staircase, right at the edge of where the light touches. I walk quickly over to it, determined to collect my trump card weapon in case I run into any other mutants.

 Just seeing my gun within reach gives me a measure of relief, and being in the light coming from the doorway adds to my sense of wellbeing after that three-on-one match in the dark basement. I feel like I’m coming back to greet an old friend…I bend over and reach for my gun –

 – and something akin to a freight train smashes into me. It’s the mutant leader. He doesn’t bother trying to take the stairs; he just leaps from the top of them, his full weight hitting me square on and slamming me against the wall. I feel the air leave my lungs for the second time today, and this time it’s worse. He’s learned from the last time, smacking the sword out of my hands before he grabs me and hurls me to the ground a few feet away. While I’m dazed, he leaps over and lands on top of me, delivering a full-on punch to my face that makes my head bounce off the floor.

 My vision goes black for a moment and I see stars. The world goes mute as my vision slowly returns. I feel thumping pressure on my face, which gradually fades up into intense pain. He is on top of me, pounding on my head, face, and chest from above with fists. He rakes his clawed hands across my face, and one of my eyes turns red, blinded by blood. I feel blood collecting in my mouth, and I struggle not to choke on it. He’s snarling like a rabid animal, spittle coming from his mouth, the blows coming faster and faster.

 I’m holding up my hands, trying to ward off at least some of the blows, but he bats them away and thrusts his head down, his mouth open, aiming for my throat. I’m able to put my arm in the way, and he gets a mouthful of thick trench coat. He bites down, hard, and even though my coat protects my arm from any real damage, the pain is excruciating.

 His growling and other vocal noises are muffled, but although I’m half-blinded by my own blood, I see in his crazed eyes a fury that terrifies me. I smell his foul breath, and I feel each tooth through my coat arm. He starts to shake my arm like a dog shaking a small cat, and now his hands reach down and wrap tightly around my throat. My vision, which was already hazy, starts going black at the corners, and he starts gnawing on my arm, as if his incisors will chew right through my coat.

 My terror drives me to fight on. I need air. I manage to take in one more small breath, and I hope and pray that it’s enough. I’m not thinking strategically anymore – I’m just acting on base instinct and fear. Every fiber of my being explodes into even greater action, my one final effort, my Hail Mary pass. Using my free hand, I’m able to pry one of his hands away, and I let out a scream, full of panic and adrenaline. Blood and phlegm spatter onto the mutant’s face, but he doesn’t release my arm. I tear it out of his mouth, seeing a tooth fly off to the side, and I grope around in the darkness as his beat-down resumes.

 My fingers find a thin shaft in the dark – the arrow. It’s still deeply embedded in his shoulder, and it’s slick with his blood. I grab onto it and pull down as hard as I can. I hear his pain-filled screech, and the rest of my body is able to fight him off of me. I’m able to pull him off, and I hold onto that arrow until the four-edged head comes out, ripping out a nice big chunk as it comes.

 He leaps at me again, but I meet him head-on with the arrow in hand, meeting his savagery with my own equal ferocity. We both go to the ground again, bloodying each other with fists and feet. Over and over I drive the arrow into his stomach, his chest, his legs, and his arms, but he never lets up and keeps pulling me down to the floor with him. I spit blood and saliva into his face to blind him as we roll around on the concrete floor, leaving red stains in our wake. After I give him a brutal elbow at the base of his throat and rake the arrow across his side, he gags and falls back. I lunge at him, punching him in the jaw, and he sprawls on the floor on his hands and knees beside me. I come to kick him in the ribs, but he lashes out first, striking my planted foot and bringing me down beside him. On the way down, I reach out to catch myself and my hand comes down on the back of his head as he’s about to get up. His forehead bounces off the floor, and while I’m lying there, still holding his head, I ram his face again into the same spot as hard as I can. His snarls cease instantly. I spring to my feet, standing over him, and with all my energy, letting out a mighty yell, I drive my booted heel straight down onto the back of his neck.

 The sickening, satisfying crunch accompanies his death spasm. He doesn’t even have time for a final breath. The entire fight with him took less than forty seconds.

 I leave my foot planted on his broken spine for a few moments, my whole body trembling. I force myself to stand and end up staggering backward. I stumble into the wall, trying to support my weight against it, but my vision is swimming. I reach up to clear my eye with my gloved hand, but it’s also covered in blood and does nothing for me. I slide down the wall to a sitting position and suck in life-giving air. The only other sound I hear is the thundering of my heart.

 I’m still holding the arrow in my right hand. I can’t let go. I reach over and one by one pry my fingers open until it drops to the ground with a clatter. My head is throbbing – I’m certain a concussion is the least of my worries. I know I need to move…I need to get out of here…I can still use the fog to slip away quietly before more of them arrive. But my body refuses to rise again, and when I cough, I still taste blood. Every part of me hurts.

 My brain won’t listen to me anymore. I slump over as my eyelids close of their own accord, refusing to open again. My heartbeat wants to slow down, and the longer I lay here, the softer the pounding in my cranium becomes. Overcome by pain and exhaustion, I finally give up and let the blackout win.