6

The Morning After

 After an undetermined amount of time, my eyes open. My body flinches and I wake with a gasp…and a gagging cough. The blood on my face has crusted over, blocking my nose and causing me to sleep with my mouth open. There’s also a viscous pool of the stuff in my mouth – I spit out the lard-like substance and take in another deep breath.

 My sides ache…I lift my hands and touch them to the sides of my head, which has mercifully stopped thundering.

 I moan. The sound of it comes out like a croak, barely recognizable as my own voice. It’s also a little bit of a gargle, and I cough some more, causing my body to contract. Pain shoots across my stomach and chest and especially my neck. My grimace makes the muscles in my face expand and contract, which introduces me to an entirely new realm of discomfort. I should find a mirror to check the damage, but I’m worried by what I might see.

 Slowly, my mind returns to the real world, and my vision takes in sights that go beyond the feet at the ends of my legs. There’s daylight pouring into the basement from the door…even more light coming in from the windows that ring the edge of the walls right up against the ceiling. The fog must have lifted and now the whole basement is dimly lit. I have no way of telling if I’ve been out for a few minutes, a few hours, or a few days. The blood on my face has thoroughly dried, so this didn’t just happen a few minutes ago.

 The bodies of the four mutants are still lying down here with me. None of them have gotten back up or moved from where they fell. I gingerly move my legs, pulling one of them and bracing myself on my knee, my other hand against the wall. I hear myself groan and I strain my arms, pushing myself to a position where I can stand and lean against the wall. My head is spinning…it’s been a long time since I’ve felt this bad. My mind strains to pull information from my senses and reconstruct my memory.

 I see the bloody arrow on the floor a few feet away, and my sword and gun in other locations around the basement. The recollection of the vicious brawl floods back, almost vividly enough to make my physical pain more acute.

 How long have I been here? The pools of blood where the mutant bodies lay still appear to be somewhat liquid – it would definitely take more than a day for those to fully coagulate, so this is probably still the same twenty-four-hour period as the fight that caused this mess. I tell myself that I still need to rest. Doubtless, I have a concussion (among plenty of other injuries). Still, I force myself to make my way around the dingy, blood-covered basement and collect my things.

 Conveniently, I also discover a small gas-powered generator hidden underneath one of the tables against the far wall, accompanied by various power cords. One of these cords connects the generator to a big laptop computer, which appears to be completely intact. I resist the temptation to test it to see if it has any power – the mutants are attracted by the use of electrical energy…generators, lamps, computers, automobiles, etc. Just about anything larger than a netbook risks drawing their attention from at least a mile away. So far, my flashlight hasn’t put out enough power to affect that, as far as I know. Though, after this incident, I might have to rethink that theory…

 I leave the generator and computer alone. If, for some outlandish reason, I need to use them, I can attempt to return to this location at some other time. The priority now is to leave as soon as I can.

 Walking around the basement helped get my body in motion, but it’s an entirely new adventure making the agonizing voyage up the stairs. Once at the top, I’m greeted by the next set of reminders of the last time I was up here. The blood spatters on the wall, in contrast to the remains in the basement, are old and completely dry. The furniture in the family room is also stained with flecks of blood, some of it overturned, broken, and otherwise in ruins. Now it looks like the majority of houses in which I’ve stayed…just one more victim in human civilization’s holocaust.

 My backpack is still on the floor where it was dropped, my katana still attached to it in its sheath. Just picking it up gives me another measure of security, even though trying to fit my arms into my backpack straps is one of the most painful things I’ve done today. The feel of its weight on my shoulders and back further awakens the lingering sensation that I need to leave as soon as possible.

 The journey up the stairs from the basement wasn’t half as bad as the trip upstairs to my room, where all my extra things are located. It’s time to pack up completely and take as much as I can with me when I go.

 By the time I’m done fully packing, I remember that there is a bathroom across from my room; even though I tell myself it’s a bad idea, I take the opportunity to check my face in the mirror. Oh, Lord! I look like I was run over by a train! Well, that’s how I feel, too, so I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.

 In my backpack, I have a tube of antibiotic ointment and half a bottle of Ibuprofen. Using some of the water from one of the water bottles and a few of the strips of cloth, I clean my face and apply the ointment, then I take a few swigs of the water to wash down two of the pills. Hopefully, this will help with the pain. My level of pain tolerance verges on extraordinary – it’s been that way my whole life – but even so my whole body still aches, my head most of all. Upon further examination in the mirror, I can see the line of bruising around my neck, which sends a chill through me. I pause to compose myself, reminding myself that I’m the victor, and that the creature that did this to me is lying in the basement, his neck flattened by my boot. As much as it hurts to see my face in this condition, I can look myself in the eyes with assertion – this is the face of the survivor.

 As I trudge back down the stairs, leaning most of my weight on the handrail, making my way to the front door, I remember it before I see it. The dead deer is still laying on the porch. I pause, probably for longer than I should, to consider what to do about it. How badly do I need the meat?

 The thought of moving on from here, spending another undefined extended period of time without the nourishment of the succulent venison is just too appalling to tolerate. I stand there for a minute or two, listening to the noises of the area around me. I don’t hear anything that stands out, and certainly none of the all-too-familiar cannibal noises.

 I set my backpack off to the side, check my surroundings, squat down, and pull out my Bowie knife, cutting as quickly as I can from only the absolute best parts. I ignore the pain of my movements by thinking about how good this will taste. I don’t have enough strength to be very precise with my cuts, so I make sure I cut large. I may not be able to take much, but I’d rather have enough to let some spoil than run out too soon. Wherever I end up, I ***will*** be eating meat tonight.

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 I couldn’t walk very far with my injuries. I think a bone in my left leg is bruised, probably the fibula, judging from how the pain is coming from further away from the center of my leg. I’m pretty sure it isn’t fractured – otherwise I wouldn’t be able to walk at all. Typically I can trek upward of ten miles in just over five hours, but I’m too sore and my leg and my back need constant breaks. I’ve probably spent a total of thirty minutes out of my five walking hours today reclining in a ditch in the side of the road or finding an abandoned car to sit in until I can catch my breath and let the pain subside. I even curled up inside a big broken concrete pipe during one of my rest stops. I can always tell when I need a break by the severity of the throbbing in my head or the pungent taste of blood in my mouth indicating that the cuts on my face are newly opened from the strain I’m putting on myself.

 Eventually, I couldn’t go any farther, so I found the nearest structure (which turned out to be a run-down gas station) and stopped to rest. I had everything prepared to make a campfire to cook some of my meat over before I realized how stupid of an idea that was. Maybe the tanks are empty and maybe not, but I wasn’t about to take that risk. It took me another twenty minutes of walking before I came upon an old park shelter. It was missing two of its main supports, causing the whole thing to tip over to one side and create a triangular lean-to shelter. This was where I was able to build my fire, and just in time, too, because it was getting pretty chilly by that point.

 I sit there, resting my leg and my back, leaning against the cool metal inside of the shelter roof as it rests on the ground and forms a deep groove in the grass and dirt that gives the entire thing a feeling of stability, of permanence. I know the fire will warm this spot up soon, but for now I enjoy the sensation of the night-chilled surface on my hot, sore face. The ointment is keeping my face moist, and since it’s so late in the season I haven’t had to fight off buzzing, creeping insects who come to investigate the strangely scented, malformed, fleshy surface.

 I haven’t found any signs of cannibal activity in the area. I also have made darn sure not to use my flashlight at all, or any other form of electronic equipment, out of fear of attracting them. I’m in no condition to risk that right now, so I’m taking every possible precaution. Honestly, I was even a little nervous making this fire, but I needed it to roast my meat.

 Trying to keep my mind off how miserable I feel, I’ve contented myself with several projects since I stopped here for the night. I cleaned my gun and all my blades, my katana, short sword, and Bowie knife chief among them. Also, I’ve made sure all my arrows are still straight and solid (even the one I used in the fight) and still are able to fit onto the bowstring. Last but not least, I’m trying to make more jerky (another good reason for the fire). I’ve spent the last three hours after dark resting here and cutting strips of meat that I’ve been letting sit over the fire on a few flat, smooth stones that I cleaned off with some water and a rag. I was able to fit at least seven pounds of meat into my backpack, all of it stuffed into those big plastic bags I found at the mega-mart. Three pounds of that meat is over the fire now, and I’ll leave it there to roast and dry out for several hours.

 Another thing that helps take my mind off my pain is the MEAT, which makes my meal tonight downright incredible compared to previous nights. I eagerly consume about a pound and a half of the venison in about twenty minutes, which I’m sure will make me sick. Plus, I’m almost positive that not all of it is fully cooked, but there was nothing that I could do to stop myself. I saw the meat sizzling over the fire and I decided to risk the food poisoning. Not smart, but so totally worth it at the time! The juicy, tender masses, oiled and dripping with their own fat and seasoned with the smoked scent of a campfire and hot stone salt, slide down my throat in gob after succulent gob, occasionally accompanied by a canned orange or a few cashews and peanuts. As I lick the drippings from my fingers and hands, I vaguely remember a time in the distant past when I used to use these things called forks, and I don’t really care to go back to those days. I try to watch how much water I consume, but I devour as much meat as I possibly can. I know I’ve brought along more than I can eat before it spoils (which is one reason I’m trying to turn some of it into jerky), and I also know that giving my body fuel and nutrition will help speed up my recovery (unless I give myself botulism), but the main reason I allow myself a feast tonight is because I’m pretty sure I deserve it after the fierce mêlée and the subsequent day of excruciating travel I’ve had to endure. This is the celebratory feast after my glorious victory against the enemy. The only things missing are the hall of torches burning bright, the barrels of mead, and the singing Viking brethren.

 My stomach, making satisfied noises as it tries to begin digesting the nearly incomprehensible morsels, tells me it is ready to get to work, which means I can let it do its job while I get a good night’s sleep.

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 The scent of the first rays of sunlight weaving their way through the fog to make the cold dew glisten on the grass wakes me from deep unconsciousness. I stretch and yawn, shuddering and wincing as my sore, stiff muscles flex and loosen slightly. It was a cold night, even with the fire – I woke up once to keep it going, then once more to take my jerky off the stones and put it away in my backpack. Four of the twenty-some strips are missing – probably stolen by a raccoon or something overnight while I was dead to the world. I haven’t slept like that in a long time.

 My full belly has given me the strength to rise and shine – it takes me less than five minutes to pack up, clear my campsite, and get moving. My morning stretch was a little painful, but even with my bruised and aching bones I still feel worlds better than I did yesterday. I must be more resilient than even I ever knew, but I’ll wait to make that estimation until I’ve finished another day of walking.

 Through the park’s screen of fiery-colored trees, which stand in stark contrast to all the black I’m wearing, I see shapes that I think might be houses or some other man-made, residential construct. It looks to be about a mile away, maybe a little further, so with no other decent options I decide to head that way. I can always come back toward the road once I’ve explored this general area.

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 The buildings I saw *are* houses. The neighborhood I find contains mostly larger, more expensive buildings, slightly more high-end homes than the flat I left a day ago. It’s also a lot cleaner, it appears, than most of the places I’ve visited. There are very few cars on the street, as if this entire flat was abandoned by all the residents at once. All the building windows are still intact, except for one open window here and there, and the houses all seem to be closed up tight. Each large home is connected to a two-car garage, and all the garage doors are closed. It won’t be too hard to get into one, but I’m a little concerned about what might be sealed up inside these buildings.

 This particular subdivision sits off to the side of the main road, as if separated from the commonness of life by a few feet of asphalt and a finely crafted brick and stone placard bearing the auspicious title, *Greenleaf Villages*. How original.

 I’ve walked around the outer edges of the plat, taking a wide circle around the pond that sits by the entry road, and now I’m standing on the side of the main road, looking to either side to see what might be around. To the left, nothing but country road. To the right, I see the shapes of more buildings in the distance, including what I think might once have been a signpost for a Taco Bell. I’ll have to check down that way once I find a place to set up camp tonight. I’m salivating just imagining the meal I’ll have tonight, and I’m eager to try that homemade jerky I cooked up last night.

 As I think of this, I feel and hear my stomach growl. I didn’t eat breakfast because I was full from the night before, so I’ll definitely be hungry when I finally settle down for the evening. As always, I look for the house with the best view of the main road. I settle on the first building to the left of the street that leads into the plat, opposite the pond near the entrance. It faces the street, but a side room has a window that opens in the direction of the main road, so I head over to it. Structurally, it appears similar to the last house I inhabited, with columns holding up the porch, two stories, and a basement, but this one is colored mostly in shades of cream and off-white.

 As I approach the house, I notice how dull it looks against the backdrop of the gray sky. I notice the thick, rolling clouds as the wind is beginning to pick up and I realize that I haven’t seen the sun all day. It looks like a storm is brewing.

 Short sword and pistol in my hands, I make my way inside, reminding myself to pause and listen at every interval until I’m absolutely sure that nothing else is living in any of the rooms. The basement is finished, but I’m determined to avoid it at all costs after I descend the stairs and a rancid smell nearly brings me to my knees. There isn’t anything living down here now, but there was something down here just recently and it left a chunky, steaming, blackish-brown gift for me to find down here. The two bathrooms upstairs are in total ruins, and only one of three bedrooms in the building has an actual bed in it. The kitchen is bare, the dining room is bereft of furniture, and the banister on the side of the curving staircase is conspicuously absent. It’s definitely clear I haven’t chosen this place because of its high standard of living.

 However, the front door and the back door both have locks on them. Without the keys, I can’t latch the deadbolts, but I can turn the locks on the knobs when I’m inside, which provides an additional measure of security. Also, there is a fireplace in the main room across from the kitchen, and there is a small pile of old, dried firewood out back. The back door is solid, not a sliding door like the last house (I may never be able to stay in a house with one of those ever again), and so I feel comfortable bringing some of the wood just inside and letting it sit by the door whenever I care to use it. When I get back from exploring other houses in the area, I’ll make a fire and cook some more meat.

 I go upstairs, to where the only bed is (‘bed’ might be a little generous of a term since it’s really just a mattress and a flat sheet) and I unpack. I take out the bolt cutters, the Ibuprofen, the antibiotic ointment, and all the other things I know I won’t need for scouting, hide them in what’s left of the vanity on the far side of the room, and then I swing my lightweight backpack up and slip my arms through the straps.

 Double-checking everything…katana, check. Short sword, check. Gun, check. Bow, check. List, check. Everything on my belt and in my pockets, check. I’m all set.

 I’ll make sure I’m back before dark.