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The dead congregate.

They are powerless alone, just pitiable revenants idling without purpose in this world. But together they are lethal, and somehow they know this, and so they seek each other out.

They were spread across the road and in the swales that ran between it and the woods to either side. And they shuffled as a group in small clumps and clusters with a sort of coordinated aimlessness, as if awaiting a force

outside of themselves to give them direction.

She stood in the middle of the road watching them, stroking the neck of a massive, tawny dog motionless beside her. A wiry mutt sitting in front of her pricked its ears, its eyes fixed on the dead floating in the heat radiating up from the ground. And though washed-out and hazy above, the sky loomed angry and purple, towering before them.

Her face was coated in sweat beneath a football helmet that amplified the sound of her heart. She adjusted the shoulder pads covering the top half of her body, and exhaled.

She moved among the dead strewn over the road, the air stifling and thick with the smell of hot asphalt. And a man, his face red and his lip beaded with sweat, circled her with a crossbow aimed at her head.

With side-long glances shifting between the man and the dead, she pulled her arrows from the scattered, desiccated corpses. They were nothing now but bland, anonymous husks draped in the remnants of the clothes they had worn the first time they had died. Their skulls collapsed, crumbling, as each arrow was freed. And weighed down by the

heavy, dead air, their dust settled quickly on the road.

The man's attention shifted from her and the dogs beside her to a bicycle parked just beyond the ring of bodies. His expression aggressive and eager, he tossed his head horse-like towards a cart attached to the bike. "What's in that cart, kid?"

She drew back from him, her eyes trained on the crossbow in his hands. The giant dog, a mastiff, planted its bulk between her and the man, marking him with a quiet intensity. The mutt was crouched low off to her side, snarling, its lip curled and fierce.

Inching closer to the bicycle, he gestured at it with his crossbow. "What's in the god-damn cart?" His eyes flashed back at the mutt creeping closer to him. "You better call off that damn dog, if you don't want it to get a bolt in the head." He swung the crossbow back and forth in an arc, aiming at each of them in turn as he continued backing towards the bicycle. "What's in the fucking cart? I'm not asking again." He punched the crossbow at her. "Go open the cart."

She did not move.

"Get over there and open the fucking cart."

She continued to stand there, quiet as a stone, staring at the crossbow in his hands.

"Open it! Now! And don't even think about touching that bow on the handle bars. I won't hesitate to shoot you dead. And those shoulder pads and helmet won't help you at all."

The mastiff shouldered itself closer to him, herding him towards the mutt.

Suddenly, a cat jumped out of a basket behind the bicycle's seat and disappeared into the river of straw-colored grass clogging the swale.

"What the hell?"

The mastiff jumped up, ramming the man square in the chest with its head, knocking him back violently with the full force of its two hundred pounds.

The man fell hard and lost his grip on his weapon, his breath knocked out of him.

The dog held him down. She kicked the crossbow away from him, out of his field of vision, and pulled off its bolts and flung it into the grass down the road just before where it forked.

"You don't even want to know what I'm going to do to you if it's broken." He pushed against the dog and it growled in his face

with a quiet menace in return. “You better get this damn dog off me, boy. Now!”

Without acknowledging him, she stared at the lightning backlighting the bruised sky beyond the fork. She turned and looked behind her and at the woods to either side then knelt down, studying the ground. She raised her head and peered into the trees in front of her. She glanced back at him, her face still, her eyes secret and alert.

Then she hurried to the bicycle, and straining against the handle bars, pushed it through the swale into the woods. Both bike and cart rolled over the sun-baked ground and through the dry, brittle grass with ease. The mutt chased after her.

Keeping the man pressed hard against the ground, the mastiff hesitated, gazing at her and the mutt as they disappeared behind the trees. It let up then, releasing the man, and loped after them.

Cursing, he sat up, his eyes casting about him. He struggled to get up off the ground. “Where’s my fucking crossbow? Where the hell is it?” Once up, he stood scowling after her. “Don’t worry. I’m going to find it. Then I’m going to find you.” He stormed off

towards the swale opposite her, flailing his way through the high grass.

He tramped through the grass with a furious sort of silence then called out to her, his tone almost conversational. “So where’re your people at, kid? It’s a bad idea to be out here all alone on the road like you are.” He stopped and stared at the point where she had entered the woods. “You never know who or what you’re going to run into.”

She stopped just within the line of trees before the dense thicket of pine scrub closed in, hidden from the road behind a curtain of brush.

She tore off the helmet and shoulder pads and shoved them under the cart, forcing her breath down. And fumbling with the locks to secure the bicycle and cart, she peeked back at the road through the trees. She wrestled a dark green tarp over them, and hoisting her backpack onto her shoulders, she called to the cat and made to turn into the woods behind her.

With the crossbow slung over his shoulder, he plowed through the screen of trees, pulling up sharply just in front of the bicycle, almost

falling as the dogs rushed him. “Where are the fucking bolts?” His voice rose to a pitch that was something more urgent than mere anger. “Where the hell are they?”

Without the helmet, her gender was now visible. And standing behind the bike, she stiffened and seemed to withdraw into herself. She pulled the bolts from the quiver at her hip and without looking up at him, threw them in the direction of the road.

A panicked rage filled his eyes as they followed the bolts to where they fell, scattered in the bramble. “You fucking bitch.” He stepped up to the bike and leaned against it, almost over it, leering down at her, his breath quick and angry.

She stared straight ahead at the space between them, her eyes glowing fiercely.

With his lip curled back, he hissed, glaring at her shaved head and the one-piece bathing suit she wore that had been hidden under her shoulder pads and jeans. “Going swimming?”

She dropped suddenly down, reaching for her bow on the ground with a fluid, practiced motion.

He lunged for it, his face crafty and sneering, but snatched his hand back, away from the mutt, before he got to it.

Grabbing the bow, she spun around struggling to free the bindle-roll attached to the bottom of her backpack as it snagged on a branch. Once free, holding the bow high above her head, clear of the undergrowth, she and the animals forced a path through the trees.

His eyes were hard and bitter as they bored into her back. “I don’t know where the hell it is you think you’re going but you won’t get very far wherever it is.” He stood rigid and tense as if unsure of what to do. He swatted away a swarm of no-see-ums and spat on the ground and wiped his face with his sweat-stained shirt. “Those locks won’t do a damn thing to keep anybody out of that cart and from taking whatever’s in it.”

For a few moments more, he scowled after her then spat again, straightening. He smacked a mosquito against his neck and ran a hand through his hair, slicking it back tight against his head. Then he turned towards the road in the direction she had thrown the bolts.

Not far in from the bicycle, she crept behind the cover of a large tree and peeked back the way they had come. She pushed an arrow into the ground, fletching up, then she and the animals pivoted and began threading their way through the brush parallel to the road.

She stopped and shrugged off her pack and bent over. Her face, sober and wary, was damp with sweat. She fought to quiet her breathing, staying like that for a moment before lifting her head and peering into the half-light around her. The only sounds were the dogs panting beside her and the rumbling of the outer bands of the storm that filled the air with the smell of rain and submerged the world in a flat, sepia-toned light.

She closed her eyes and took several long, slow breaths.

Alone with the dogs, she waited until the cat picked its way to them through the thick underbrush. Then all four backtracked towards the bicycle, angling deeper into the woods as they went.

When she drew even with a flash of red off to her side in the distance, she pushed

an arrow into the ground in line with it and waited with the dogs, silent and watchful, on the small, upright tail winding its way towards them. And once together again, they turned and headed straight into the woods.

The arrow was almost lost in the gloom behind her. She pushed another into the ground and sat down between the dogs and worked loose the laces of her knee-high, moccasin boots.

Then her head snapped up at the sound of something large crashing towards them through the brush.