Definitely More Than Ankle Deep

It’s crazy how fast things can change in just a few hours. The day the world went to shit I was ankle deep in shit working on yet another issue that needed my urgent attention. I guess you could say that I'm a jack of all trades of sorts. When the extended family and friends need something fixed I get the call. Never mind that waiting a day or two would see it fixed by the city or building management. Yet again I'd gotten called in by my cousin Billy to trudge down in the basement of his store and fix whatever was causing the suer to back up. so I squeezed my way down pass the giant freezers near the kitchen and into their musty basement. The smell of ancient damp cardboard and rusted pipes met my nose. I flipped on the high powered flashlight I always carried with me on these jobs and surveyed my surroundings. the Center of the basement was taken up by a supporting pillar and generator than cast weird shadows across the cobwebbed bricks and concrete. near a corner was and old boombox atop a pile of dust caked boxes. Off to the left, opposite the metal ladder was a metal grate leading to the suers. I could smell the dank sour smell from here. There was definitely something that needed fixing. I sighed, checked my tool box and got to work.

It had been a few hours and I had finally found the offending pipe and gotten down to the unpleasant business of setting it right. I hummed absent-mindedly and gave the wrench a final twist and paused. I could hear the faint echos of electric guitars and drums drifting and bouncing down the twists of the suers from the dusty boombox back in the basement. To my surprise its batteries still had enough juice in them to keep me company a couple hours in the dark. I wasn't quite sure what time it was, down here time seemed to stretch longer than it should. I frowned, and stood still. What was that? I thought I heard the splash of feet, but surely not. Nothing. Probably my imagination sounds tended to magnify and distort through the tunnels down here. I continued packing my tools away and splashed my way back through the gray water. As I neared the grate leading back to the basement I could clearly hear the dying distortion of the boombox. Probably the last time it would get play time. I shoved the grate open and scraped my feet best I could. My light sent shadows bouncing around and cast my figure starkly against the wall. I awkwardly juggled my toolbox and light as I pushed the grate back shut. I almost missed the movement out from the corner of my eye. I thought it was just my own shadow looming against the supporting pillar, but the scrape of shuffling shoes on concrete alerted me that I was not alone down here. I turned. I caught a bloody figure in the glare of my light and jumped back. I defensively swung my tool box in front of me as the figure lurched forward. Its face was smeared with blood, clothing tattered, and ripped to shreds. I could not tell if it was a man or woman in the shifting shadows. Its eyes were wide and the reflection of my light glinted back from blank orbs. This person was crazy or high on something. There was blood everywhere! Down there face. Covering their neck and hands. They didn't stop and lunged toward me mouth gaping! On instinct I swung my toolbox and the steel corner connected with a meaty thwack. I winced. the Figure collapsed and I dropped my toolbox with a resounding clang.

 My heart pounded in my chest! What the hell was that! The crumpled form huddled in the pool of harsh light from my dropped flashlight. The blood glistened, stark against the pale skin. The head was clearly caved in from my blow. Fuck! I was going to be in deeper shit than I just walked through. They may have been crazy but I just murdered someone! This was not good. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone. No signal. Great. I scooped up my flashlight and peered shakily around the rest of the basement. No other figures loomed in the dark. Blood streaked the rungs of the ladder leading up. Bloody hand prints stained the bricks and mortar as if someone had tried to claw their way through. What the hell was going on? I made my way up the ladder and slowly pushed the hatch open. The first thing I noticed was more blood. Spatters lead in an obvious trail to the basement entrance. The side of the industrial freezer was smeared with more bloody handprints and what looked like human hair. I could literally feel my heart starting to thump faster in my chest. There was something terrible going on. I tried my phone again. Still no signal. Maybe if I got further out. I slowly walked through the demolished deli kitchen. It looked like someone had charged through and knocked everything off the counters in a massive struggle. More blood, broken glass and spilled food. As I passed by I grabbed a cleaver from the knife block and slowly crept to the doorway. A body lay slumped in the entrance to the rest of the store a knife similar to mine sticking from its eye. It took me a second to recognize Billy’s bloody face. His mouth was open and bloody, teeth blood stained and bared. There appeared to be chunks ripped from his forearms and his cheek was sliced open so I could see into his mouth from the side.

 Suffice it to say that I was starting to feel numb and I was probably in shock as I slowly walked through the store. Isle after isle of destruction and carnage. There were figures moving around in the depths of the building moving about much as I was in a daze. It’s a miracle that I survived those first minutes as I wandered around aimlessly trying to make sense of what had happened. I knew what zombies were of course I’ve seen my fair share of zombie apocalypse movies. But its one thing to shoot the shit and talk about what you would do during a break out and how your would prepare and survive. Its completely different when you walk through human blood and see the brutality in person. Bite marks covered all the corpses I stumbled across, but not all seemed to get back up as a zombie. The horrific sound of animalistic eating drifted to me from behind the isles, sourceless, and somehow worse for being so. I could feel myself starting to panic and I moved more quickly toward the glass doors in front. The aimless shuffle of feet began to move toward me with purpose as I brought attention to myself. Sparing one last look behind me I fled the hellhole.

 Out onto the street I ran. Once I started running the pent up feeling of fear and panic took hold. I had to get home and hunker down. I had my hunting crossbow at home. I had the vague idea that once home I could somehow figure out what to do. I felt exposed and alone out here. Burning cars cluttered the street. Glittering glass speckled the blacktop. Strewn bodies like broken toys dotted the road where people had fallen or been taken down. How could this have happened so fast in the few hours I’d been down there. This was just surreal, almost dream-like. But the jarring thud of my boots on the pavement, the feel of my fear sweat dripping down my neck, the acrid smell of burned rubber and gasoline told me this was very much real. I just had to cross the bridge and head south a block and I’d reach my house. I had at least a week’s worth of supplies and had recently restocked my arrows. I’d been planning on a hunting trip sometimes soon when things eased up a bit. I reached the bridge and slowed down. I had a decent view all around me from here and there was not much movement other than eddies of smoke in the distance and the far off sound of car alarms. It was as if I’d been in the suers for days rather than hours. While our town was by no means a metropolis, there was always traffic and the constant hum of a busy city. Now it was dead. Across the bridge lay the residential section of the city and seemed less chaotic. The distant steeple of the church beckoned off to the north, but I knew better than to head there. That would be the first place people would run for refuge. It would become a death trap and center of death once someone became infected. I edged my way passed empty cars, the wood creaking and gently swaying beneath my steps. From next to me a bloody creature lunged from the water and grabbed me through the bridge railing. Its teeth snapped inches from my face and I fuckin screamed and fell back, tearing free from its grip. My shirt tore at the seams and I fell on my ass on the bridge and scooted my ass away as fast as I could. The zombie growled and spat and scrabbled at the chain-link between us. Soon I realized that the innocent seeming bridge was not so empty as I thought. Bodies began to emerge from the water as though being pulled by an invisible fishing line. Both sides began to jangle and rattle as the zombies tore madly and mindlessly at the barrier. I stumbled to my feet and started running again. I wasn’t about to wait around until they broke through.

 I managed to lose them as I darted from house to house and turned south down my street and finally reached my door. My broken door. I stopped in place. In all my panicked running I hadn’t considered my house would be compromised. I slowly approached listening for any sounds. Nudging the door slowly open I slid inside my back to the wall. Something had definitely been in here. My furniture was knocked over and there was blood on the blue carpet. I edged my way to the hall and slowly approached my bedroom doorway. I Readied myself, my crossbow and quiver of arrows were inside. I would grab and run. I was probably not alone in here, but as much as I strained to hear movement there was nothing. I quickly grabbed the doorknob and swung the door open and lunged in.

 I was immediately knocked back and pinned beneath a massive body! My hands came up instinctively and grasped at the neck of my attacker in an attempt to hold them off. The hot wet sensation of saliva covered my face and the familiar furry body of Night Eyes filled my arms. My heart, which had momentarily stopped, began beating again and I hugged my stupid dog as he furiously licked my face and hands.

“You stupid mutt,” I said laughing. “You nearly killed me of a heart attack!” Night eyes was a huge Norwegian Elk hound with a cream, silver and black coat with black pointed ears. His deep chested barks often served enough as a deterrent to keep salesman and unwanted visitors from my door. With him at my side and my compound crossbow we’d often brought home a rack of antlers more than once. The hunt was often close and difficult but so rewarding. I’d been so afraid that I’d come home and find him torn apart or gone. Finding the door open had only confirmed my fears.

 Remembering the situation I pushed Night Eyes off me and pushed to my feet. I quickly grabbed my crossbow and slung the quiver over my shoulder. Loading my crossbow with a bolt I felt much safer and went through the house searching for what had cause all the blood on the carpet. I found nothing, and the dog was not talking. I secured the door and windows and quickly and quietly gathered all my things. I stuffed as much of my supplies as I could into a hiking backpack and an extra set of bolts in a separate bag. These were going to be cumbersome to carry but I didn’t have a choice. I’ve never used a gun before and besides the crossbow was much quieter. I planned to head for the woods and get lost for a while. I didn’t have anyone I could reach out to easily and trying to find anyone at this point would be suicide. All attempts at using the phone had yielded no results. Either the cell towers were down or we were being jammed for some reason.

 I knelt in front of night Eyes and made him sit. I slowly looked him over for bites and scratches, but could not find anything. I removed his collar and jingling tags.

“Okay boy, we are going to have to be quiet. This is going to be a very different hunt than we usually do. I can’t have you barking at things, they won’t scare off so easily. I gently stroked his pointed ears and hugged him. I’m going to really need you buddy. We’re on our own now.”

Night Eyes licked my hand and softly wined, his ear twitching at some far off explosion.

“Lets go boy.”

I gave him one more pat on his broad head and went for the door. Slowly opening it I peered out and found the coast clear. Giving Night Eyes a silent hand signal to heel I moved out.

 We made our way from backyard to back yard until I reached the edge of the river. This was the house of my neighbor Jennifer. I knew she had a canoe she often paddled up and down the river down to ranger park and back on the weekends. My thought was to take it, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind at this point and make my way down to the park and lose myself in the forest. Ranger park connected on the northeast to a vast stretch of untamed woods and I doubted anything could find us once we made it. But first we had to get away from the city limits. As I approached I carefully scouted the surroundings, crossbow leveled and ready to fire. Seeing nothing, I stepped into Jennifer’s side yard where she kept her canoe stored beneath a tarp. I had to put everything down in order to remove the heavy material and god did it make a racket. Empty recycling bins and god knows what went clattering across the ground and I winced. Night Eyes looked at me like I was an idiot and I cursed as I heard something else crash inside the house. The river was almost literally right at Jenifer’s back door, only 15 or so feet from the edge of her property. Those fifteen feet were going to be loud and not easy to traverse with all my gear and the 14 foot long canoe. I threw everything into the canoe and grabbed the paddle from their place against the house and threw them in as well. Night Eyes was glaring passed me at the house, his front paws splayed, back paws dug in ready to charge. His ear were flattened and a low growl came from his bared teeth.

“We don’t have time boy lets go.”

I urged him and began dragging the canoe, non-too softly across the yard toward the water. The sound of shattering glass and thumping feet came from the front of the house and I knew something was coming. I moved forward, passed the old swing set, passed the elm tree that shaded the second floor of the house. I drew even with the small garage behind the house, almost there. I reached the edge of the water and set the canoe down. I looked back to the house and saw Night Eye still in his stubborn stance. I knew that look. That was his I’ve got this bear on the back foot and I’m not moving until he does.

“for fuck’s sake! Night Eyes! Come! Night Eyes heel!”

Damn stubborn animal wouldn’t listen. He began to bark. Loud, insistent, staccato blasts of sound that carried for half a mile. Barks meant to alert the hunter that the prey had been brought to bay. Barks that would alert every creature in the surrounding neighborhood that dinner was served.

 I slung my crossbow and quiver into the boat and ran back to grab the stupid mut. He was going to get himself killed. Half a dozen shambling figures lurched around the corner and came straight for my dog. I tried grabbing Night Eyes, but having removed his collar to make him quieter I had nothing to grab him by but the scruff of his neck. Moving an 80 pound dog is no easy eat even when you have a leash. Getting him to move now was nearly impossible. Stupidly I’d left my crossbow back on the boat. Great fucking good it did me there! I rushed back to the garage and grabbed the axe my neighbor used for chopping firewood. It wasn’t much, notched in places and a weathered wooden handle it wouldn’t stand up to much abuse. My dog was still furiously barking and slowly backing up from the approaching crowd. I tried calling him to me but he was too focused on the on-coming zombies to listen. Rushing forward one of the faster zombies almost managed to grab him. He darted back and nipped at the zombie’s leg in passing. The zombie lunged too far forward and fell but kept scrabbling for my dog. I moved in from the side swinging my axe at the nearest zombie. I aimed for the head and felt the satisfying shwunk as my axe embedded itself part way through the left temple of what used to be an old man with graying hair. The zombie kept coming seeming not to have felt my blow. I must not have hit a vital part of the brain. The stupid axe slipped from my hand and stuck in the creature’s head like some bizarre head ornament. His callused hands scrabbled at me and his mouth chomped ceaselessly trying to reach me. I shoved it back into the rest of the crowd and they jumbled amongst themselves. Unstopping pushing forward over each other. Some fell but crawled forward others continued to run forward trampling over the fallen. What once had been a man in his early twenties came at me next his once neat hair matted with blood, blue button down shirt in tatters. I wrestled with it trying to avoid the gnashing teeth. We careened stupidly across the yard like to awkward dancers who didn’t know the steps to a complex dance. I slammed the creature back against the low wall of the fire pit near the garage. I could vaguely hear the sound of Night Eyes in the background snarling and moving like a dervish staying ahead of the zombies. The creature in my face was all brute strength and no thought, but it was all I could do to keep it from biting any part of me. It felt no pain and no matter how I grabbed it, it mindlessly moved its mouth toward my nearest body part. I slammed it again harder this time. The brick firepit dug into my shins as I grabbed it by the hair and brought it down on the side of the bricks over and over, and over and over and over. Teeth shattered. Skin tore. I could taste my own blood and sweat as I mindlessly met its madness with my own animalistic fury born of the primal need to survive! The creature finally went still as I felt the coconut crunch of its skull caving in under my assault. I rolled off the body and glared around, my blood pounding in my ears. I’ve often heard the expression seeing red, and I always thought it hyperbolic bullshit, but my eyes felt blurred and my vision was tunneled in on these infernal creatures and if not literally red, everything felt red. Fury at my dog being in danger, the fear of dying, the pounding of my heart in my chest pushing me to live one more second. All translated to rage and the feeling of red. I lunged forward into battle my own teeth bared.

 My first target was the old man. The axe still waggled back and forth stupidly on the side of his head. He, no it, scrabbled in the dirt pulling itself forward not bothering to stand up as my dog darted back and forth. I slammed the heal of my work boot down on the back of its head to keep it still and grabbed the handle. I braced myself and tugged it out with a wet crunching sound. I furiously began to slam the side of the axe into its temple. The edges of the wound grew bigger and caved in with each blow until the body went still as well. The remaining four zombies were surrounding and slowly cornering Night Eyes against the side of the garage. He didn’t seem to have been bitten yet which was a huge relief. I didn’t know if dogs could turn and I didn’t want to find out. I swung my axe, twisting my hips into it. I had no idea of proper form or how to fight properly, but I just imagined the back of the head of the nearest zombie to be a fast ball I was meaning to hit for the fences. Crunch! Like a watermelon being dropped on cement my axe cleaved cleanly into the head of the zombie and it fell instantly dead. My axe was stuck and I had to release it as two of the zombies broke off and lunged at me.

I jumped back and ran for the house. I turned the corner and pounded up the porch steps and hopped through the floor to ceiling window that had been shattered into glittering shards on the front lawn. I had a vague plan to dart out the back door and lose the zombies inside, but I was met with more zombies inside as they came from somewhere within the house. I shoved one aside into the rest and rushed into the kitchen. I toppled chairs and stools behind me trying to slow them down. The back door was a sliding floor to ceiling affair that looked out onto the back yard and the river beyond. It was firmly closed. With a flimsy screen door visible on the other side. I grabbed up the nearest bar stool and swung! Crash! The door glass burst outwards in a cascade of safety glass I charged forward using the stool as a battering ram and crashed through the screen door and what remained of the glass. I tumbled ass over tea-kettle out on to the back yard. Night Eyes came dashing from around the garage and stood next to me ears pinned back. I staggered up to my feet and glanced over my shoulder. The doorway was crowded with at least ten zombies. Why so many were in the house in the first place I don’t know, but things were not looking good. I looked back toward the canoe and my eye caught something sitting against the wall of the garage. I grinned to myself and I ran for it.

 It was like a survivalist game of tag. A deadly game of keep away where I was the juicy morsel they were trying to catch. I ran through the yard a swarm of 14 on my tail like the most morbid sort of ducklings following their mother. I weaved around the tree. Jumped over the fire pit. Dodged through the rusty swing set and back around to the front of the house. One misstep and I’d fall and that would be the end. I slowed down and let some catch up to me and continued my charge. Up the stairs into the living room up the hall and back to the kitchen and out the back shattered door. I tossed the empty can behind me and jumped in the canoe after shoving it the last few feet to the river. Night Eyes leapt in after me and barked furiously back at the swarm emerging from the house. I laughed madly and struck a match and tossed it back onto the gas soaked grass. Bright orange and yellow flames sprung to life and raced back along the trail I’d left. Like a beast pouncing the flames struck at the swarm of zombies still bunched in the back door of the house. At first it appeared as if the flames vanished through the zombies, like an insubstantial mirage. Then the house burst into hellish flames.

I shoved away from the bank and the canoe drifted lazily out to midstream. The water reflected a deepening twilight sky, the sun hung low in the horizon. Behind me the house burned like a second sun, orange tongues of flame leaping from the second story window to engulf the old elm tree. As the river began to carry me down stream, the last glimpse I caught was of the countless leaves catching fire and glittering with tiny embers standing starkly against a blue sky that still trailed gray smoke. The river turned around a bend and I lost sight of my home town.

 All I had to do now was keep clear of the banks and reach ranger park. Once there I knew how to make myself scarce in the woods. With my crossbow and Night Eyes we could live off the land for a very long time. I just hoped the area around the park was less dangerous than my own home town had been. I absent-mindedly patted Night Eyes on the head.

”Sure glad you can’t turn into those things buddy. I would hate to see what a pack of dogs would be like turned undead. I sure couldn’t run circles around them like those others. Lets never find out huh?”