

THE QUARRY

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Surviving Loneliness

The surface, tensed and drawn, split apart as the steel point drove its way into the gap, droplets from the puncture streaming into the mud. Sewing in the rain was a terrible idea. Ben, a grubby faced New-Worlder, his small hands coated in the dust of the dying world, pulled out the needle and replaced it farther down. The fact that he'd managed to find a spot with enough shelter for him to light a fire granted him an opportunity he couldn't afford to pass up. After a few more strokes he flattened out the patch he was sewing in. It was a small, poorly cut piece of flannelette cloth from a shirt he'd scavenged a day earlier. He reclined against the large hanging rock at his back. It felt good to sit down for a while. The soles of his boots were crumbling and

his socks were closer to anklets now. He began stitching up the third side of the patch, and as he did so he turned his head toward a rusty, dented camping stool beside him.

‘You know what?’ he said to the vacant chair, ‘I don’t even know how the Old-Worlders did this.’ The stool said nothing. ‘How could I? I’ve never met one,’ said Ben, pulling out the needle to examine his work. In his lap lay a cargo jacket covered in mix-matched pockets of varying materials and sizes. The newest addition had a special position just below his collar. He pulled the jacket on and placed his needle and thread into their new home.

‘There,’ he said to the stool. ‘A pocket for my pocket making kit.’ The stool remained appropriately still. Ben raised an eyebrow, ‘It’s not pointless, it’s brilliant! You’re pointless!’

‘Hello?’ Ben jumped as he heard the rasping female voice calling out from down the hill. He threw his rain-drenched blanket over the fire and flattened himself against the rock, pulling a small shard of jagged metal from his boot. ‘Is someone there?’ struggled the voice. He peeked cautiously down the slope. Just below on the Old-World highway beneath him a frail woman stumbled up the hill.

‘She sounds really sick,’ he whispered to the chair, leaning out a little farther. Before he could decide whether it was safe to approach the woman, three figures tore through the shadows beside her, knocking her to the ground. Ben watched as she kicked wildly at the figures as they dragged her down the rocky slope toward the highway. Ben turned to his stool.

‘I can’t!’ he hissed, ‘I don’t even have a gun!’ Suddenly the black sky lit up with bolts of light as the roaring of gunshots shook the stones around his feet, painting the rain in gold. Ben gritted his teeth for the sound of screaming, but heard only the woman’s voice.

‘Thank you, mister! Thank you!’ Ben peered back down the hill. He saw two people still standing; one the woman, struggling to pick herself up, and the other a man, twenty metres from her, clad in makeshift armour carrying a collection of weaponry beyond anything Ben had ever seen. The woman began to approach the man, her arms extended in gratitude as he reloaded his revolver. Ben darted from his rock and slid down the hill to her side, wrenching her away from the man.

‘Hey!’ she shouted.

‘What are you doing?’ barked Ben, ‘He’s a Wolf!’ The man ignored them and began searching the bodies. He stalked through the carnage gathering ammunition and supplies. The woman looked confused.

‘You aren’t from here are you?’ asked Ben. She shook her head. ‘You from a settlement?’

‘Diggertown,’ spluttered the woman, ‘but there’s no food there, so I left.’ Ben watched the Wolf as he picked up a can of beans from beside one of the bodies. However, upon realising he couldn’t fit it in his pocket he dropped it. The woman edged forward.

‘Excuse me... mister... would you... could I travel with you?’ she asked. The Wolf turned to face her. His scarred face was creased and wrinkled the way Ben’s fingers got when he stood in the rain and his hair was grey like it was dying.

‘Pockets?’ he asked. The woman turned out her pants. He turned away. Ben picked up the can of beans.

‘I have pockets,’ he said, placing it into his coat. ‘Most still empty,’ he added. The stranger looked him up and down, the creases stretching as he sneered.

‘Keep up,’ he growled, passing him another can. The woman watched as they began walking away.

‘What about me?’ she asked. The Wolf looked back over his shoulder.

‘Pray.’

The pair spoke little as they followed the highway east over the next two days, despite Ben’s best efforts, but as they came to a winding trench the Wolf finally broke his silence.

‘Stop thinking about her,’ he said.

‘You think she’ll be ok?’ said Ben.

‘No,’ said the man. Ben paused, his eyes down cast. ‘Seriously, stop.’

‘You are a Wolf, right?’ asked Ben. The man hung his head.

‘I roam, I hunt outlaws, I kill for money. So sure, why not?’ Ben furrowed his brow.

‘What’s an outlaw?’ The Wolf groaned.

‘Someone who does bad things.’

‘Doesn’t that make you an outlaw?’

‘I thought so.’ The two followed the road until it reached the remains of a town. The structures were broken down and decaying, but made from bricks, not assorted scrap. Definitely Old-World, but hardly abandoned. Barricades surrounded the gates and unmanned machine guns were posted atop a bell tower.

‘You see that crack in the wall over there?’ said the Wolf. Ben followed his finger to a point just short of the barricades.

‘Sure.’

‘Wait there until I come back.’

‘Sure thing... uh, Wolf,’ said Ben. The Wolf nodded and vaulted the barricade. Ben sprinted over to the point his companion had identified and proceeded to set up his camping chair.

‘He’s not going to kill me!’ he said to the chair. ‘You’re just jealous that I can talk to him now instead of you,’ he said. The chair was unconcerned. ‘Bah, you’ll see. If I can learn to be like him I’ll never go hungry again. I’ll be able to walk on the Old-World roads instead of around them. I won’t just be some pockets guy buying protection, I’ll be a Wolf!’ He sifted through the dirt with his finger, ‘Besides, it’d be nice to have someone to talk to for a while,’ he sighed. ‘What? No I wasn’t ignoring you,’ he said quickly, ‘I was just thinking.’

The next few minutes were marked only by gunshots, shouting and one loud bang. After a short time the Wolf returned through the barricades.

‘So I guess you finished killing the whole damn world,’ said Ben, collapsing his stool. The wolf raised an eyebrow.

‘You aren’t bringing that. Come on, I got a job for you, Pockets Guy,’ replied the Wolf, turning to leave. Ben placed the stool back down.

‘Pockets Guy?’ he asked, rounding the corner to see smoke gushing from the entrance to a building at the end of the road.

‘That’s what they call you, right? You kids who get protection from mercs by selling yourselves as pack mules,’ said the Wolf. Ben quickened his pace to keep up.

‘Sure, but why not call me ‘Ben’?’ The Wolf looked back over his shoulder.

‘You keep calling me Wolf, as if my job was my name.’ Ben nodded slowly, brow raised as though contemplating some great revelation. ‘Not that it’s wrong,’ the Wolf mused, ‘What man is more than his work?’ he said, stepping over a smouldering body, its face split and torn, erupted in the centre like a bad fruit hollowed by worms. The Wolf saw Ben grimacing. ‘Forty-fours can do amazing work,’ he said, stroking the hilt of his revolver. Ben suddenly remembered why he avoided Wolves. As they reached the entrance to the smoking building, Ben raised his head and asked.

‘Wait. Does that mean you actually have a name?’ The Wolf stopped at the door and turned, brow creased.

‘What? You think Wolves are some kind of supernatural beings?’ he chided. Ben shrugged. The Wolf shook his head in disbelief. ‘Fucking New-Worlders,’ he muttered as he entered the building.

Ben followed the Wolf through what he figured was some kind of Old-World fortress. It had two levels, each with its own walkways, and on either side were enormous chambers with tall barricades lined from end to end. An ingenious defensive strategy thought Ben, though he couldn’t understand why the barricades had items stacked on them. They came to the end of a long, broad hallway and found another such room, only this one had large letters bolted to the wall above the entrance: *WOOLWORTHS*.

‘Who’s Woolworth?’ asked Ben. The Wolf hung his head with a groan.

‘Just help me, and canned food only! These shelves haven’t been restocked in twenty-five years,’ he said starting to grab food off the shelves and handing it to him. Ben stared in shock at the sheer volume of supplies. Ben took a bag out of one of his larger pockets. The Wolf looked at him as if he had just pulled out a live animal.

‘What? I’m prepared,’ said Ben. The Wolf grinned and started shovelling food into the bag. ‘And if I may ask, are you planning on travelling somewhere... like,

really far away?’ asked Ben, gawking at the ever growing horde. Suddenly, the Wolf stopped. He threw the last can into the bag and pulled Ben up by his collar.

‘Alright, Pockets Guy, we’re out of time. Take this bag and everything you have and follow this path to the end of the shopping centre. When you’re out follow the road by the clock tower back to the wall. Wait where I had you wait before. Don’t stop for anything or anyone. Lose my food and I skin you. Clear?’ Ben stared at him for a moment, stunned.

‘Uhhhh, what’s a shopping centre?’ he asked. A crash came from back down the way they’d come followed by frenzied voices. The Wolf growled as he pulled his assault rifle from his back. He grabbed Ben and spun him to face down the corridor.

‘Run till you hit daylight then haul ass for the crack in the wall! Move!’ he shouted. Ben began to run, but turned around for a moment when he realised the Wolf wasn’t following.

‘Aren’t you coming?’

‘You’ve got the pockets, kid, now EXFIL!’ The Wolf opened fire down the hall.

Ben ran as fast as he could manage with all the weight he was carrying. It wasn’t long before he came to the building exit. Sunlight beckoned him out and he saw the clock-tower directly ahead of him, only the machine guns were no longer vacant. The gunners sighted down immediately and opened fire. Ben launched himself down the road, swerving side to side with the weight of the bag over his shoulder. All around him the dirt sprung up like tiny volcanoes erupting around his feet. Then they stopped. Ben looked back as one of the gunners dropped from the tower with a stream of red following after. The air around him was still full of the sound of gunfire, which persisted even after he had found his spot by the wall. He dropped to the dirt with his back to the wall and looked over to his camping stool, still sitting where he’d left it.

‘Shut up,’ he barked at the chair.

Ben waited anxiously for an end to the perpetual ringing of gunfire and explosions, trying to comfort his camping stool. Presently, the Wolf returned dropping over the wall with a thud.

‘Alright, let’s go,’ he said urgently. Ben looked up at him and the trickles of blood snaking down his tattered shirt and pants. He was covered in it. His jacket and rifle were gone and his sleeves had been torn into tourniquets the way Ben had learnt in the wastes. Amid the blood Ben could make out a tattoo of a winged knife on his shoulder with the words ‘*Who Dares Wins*’ written across it.

‘We need to get you help,’ said Ben. The Wolf laughed.

‘Relax kid, I never die till the job’s done,’ he replied. Ben looked him up and down feeling far from comforted. He could tell from his experience treating his own injuries that he would only last a day or two.

‘Come on,’ said the Wolf, ‘Job’s not done yet.’

Around half a day’s walk later the two found themselves approaching a small settlement. A large signpost sat out the front reading *Diggertown*. Ben turned to the now pale Wolf.

‘Why are we here?’ he asked. The Wolf stopped walking.

‘So you can take those supplies to Christie at the inn. Tell her that Tom took care of her problem,’ he said. Ben nodded.

‘Shouldn’t you see the doctor?’ he asked as the Wolf began to stumble away down the street.

‘My next job was to gather medical supplies for the town,’ replied the Wolf.

‘You’re really happy to die here?’ asked Ben. The Wolf turned with something resembling a smile.

‘Don’t worry about me, kid. I’m just a piece of something that should have killed itself long ago.’ Ben watched his new friend limp away before making his way to the inn where he found a dark haired girl with the most welcoming smile he’d ever seen. He could see dozens of scars on her arms and cheeks and she had more muscle than he did, despite her slender appearance. He lifted the food onto the counter and her eyes widened.

‘Tom says he took care of a problem for you,’ said Ben. The girl’s eyes flashed at the name.

‘You’ve seen Tom? Where is he?’ she demanded. Ben took a step back in shock.

‘Uh, he’s... well he’s bleeding out down the street. He said you-’

‘Ran out of medicine. Yes we bloody did, but perhaps now we can afford to fix that,’ she said wheeling round to grab a rifle off the wall behind her along with a pouch of grenades, a knife, two bandoliers, two pistols and a pair of aviators. She moved the food behind the counter and placed a bag of coins on the counter before marching out into the street. Ben took his pay and followed her up to the entrance to the town where the other pockets guys hung out looking for work. There she stood in the middle of the street and shouted.

‘Who wants to help me raid a slaver occupied hospital out near Rippley’s Revenge?’ The street fell silent. Ben could see the Wolf reclining against a wall further down the road. He dropped his camping stool in the dust and stepped forward.

‘I’ve got pockets,’ he said displaying his jacket. Christie smiled.

‘Let’s roll, Pockets Guy.’

The End