

IT STARTED WITH A ROAD

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It started with a road.
And a wanderer.
And ... and a gun.

Oh, and a manor.

OK, arguably it started with plenty of things. But this - *this* - scene, started with a road.

And a wanderer.

She was trudging, and had trugged, and would continue to trudge. But not for much longer, although she didn't know it yet. Her feet ached with every step, the soles of her tall boots caked heavily with mud, clay, and the distinct tint of old internal organs. She clung to her long, flowing trench coat as if there was any actual chance it could fight off the mischievous gusts of bitter wind that swirled in and out of her clothing. The straps of her bulky traveller's pack cut into her shoulders like saw blades. Her hat, that looked like two hats sewn together crudely in the middle, was drenched in an icy sweat.

She trugged down a long, dishevelled road that cut through a vast, empty plain. Her body felt close to giving out. She had suffered to get here.

She had made others suffer. Her ammo was almost spent. Her food supplies were growing dangerously low. Her water had fouled days ago, but it was still cool, and she still drank it. And she still trudged.

A gust of wind snorted dirt into her eyes and she squinted, peering through ugly goggles as she coughed and wiped the filth away. It would be so easy to lie down and let something in the night take her away, but she wouldn't give up. She couldn't.

Then, gritting her teeth and heaving her tired body forwards, she saw what she was searching for.

A distant wooden structure was coming into view. She had mistaken it earlier for another Old World ruin: some decrepit structure still standing after countless decades alone in the Waste. But she was wrong. It was intact, even unbelievably so. Or at least it appeared to be from a distance.

And so the wanderer trudged faster.

The woman arrived at a gravel path that led towards the wooden structure's ageing porch. Although it stood defiantly against the onslaught of time and, by the looks of things, a fair few wars, the structure had clearly passed its prime. Where they weren't pockmarked by bullet holes and what appeared to be deep claw gouges, the rotting weatherboards were scorched with fire and black from damp. The few remaining unsmashed windows were laced with spiderweb-like cracks, and the front porch was close to falling away from the main structure. The colour of the timber walls looked like something the wanderer had seen after relieving herself of her last meal.

But it was all still standing. Exactly as she'd been promised.

A slight smile tickled at the edge of the woman's chapped lips. But...

...something stirred on the second floor.

Her smile vanished.

Slowly, shifting her gaze from one window to the other, the wanderer lowered her pack to the ground and rested it at her muddy boots. The wind whistled a high-pitched shrill through the dusty plain, gnashing at the

wanderer with icy fangs. She grew tense, and clenched a gloved hand around a bone-handled revolver pistol resting on her hip.

A shadow flashed past in a ground-floor window, but vanished from sight instantly. The wanderer grumbled to herself.

It was never easy.

She unbuttoned her holster and drew the gleaming pistol, thumbing back the hammer with a gentle *click*.

“If you’re human,” she shouted, her voice ringing out into the plain, “you better step out here quick.”

Silence responded.

“I just want the building, not your life,” she called again. “And I have money to pay for it.”

Again, silence. Nothing but the whistling wind.

The wanderer frowned, gazing intently into each window. She let out a slow breath, spying nothing but shadows. No voices answered from within the building, but she sensed on some primal level that its occupants were gazing back. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

“Alright,” she said slowly. And then, muttering to herself, “I guess it’s not humans, then.”

Dirty gravel crunched loudly as she stepped closer to the porch. She placed each boot carefully, eyes scanning constantly, ready to change direction at a moment’s notice. She held her bone-handled pistol with one hand, finger on the trigger.

The wanderer saw nothing else stir as she took a first cautious step onto the structure’s tired porch. The boards creaked loudly no matter how she shifted her weight, yawning and moaning with every footfall. But still, not a peep from inside.

Another exhausted grumble escaped through her lips.

She paused for one last listen.

Nothing.

Alright, then.

The wanderer leapt the final few feet and pounded the door with her left boot. It burst inwards with no resistance, thrust off its old hinges to land perfectly whole on the floor. The room it revealed was large and gloomy, cloaked in a blanket of dust that swirled away in fright as the door flumped

to its grave. Scattered throughout were the remnants of what may have once been a tavern; ugly chunks of table, chair and other miscellaneous bits of furniture lay abused, broken, and not tidied up properly. And amid this rotting museum were piles of discarded bones - human included.

A gurgling noise bubbled up from the opposite corner and grew into a full-blown screech. It was trailed by a shambling horror, a wretched being that charged out of the darkness, reaching with spindly claws and gnashing with decayed teeth. Its eyes bulged out of its sockets as though it had seen itself in a mirror, and its veiny grey skin clung to its bones like someone had thrown a leathery cloak over a skeleton and then sucked all the air out.

The wanderer's lips formed an involuntary grimace. Mutants. Grey-skins, specifically. But, in the Waste, it could always be worse.

She pointed her weapon at its charging form and squeezed the trigger.

A deafening crack shook the walls, and the creature tripped forwards as its head flew in the other direction. But before she could proceed, something landed suddenly on the woman's back. She swore, staggering sideways from the weight of a screaming creature wrapping itself around her back and shoulders. Its skinny claws raked at her coat and neck, slashing apart her clothing and skin. She tried to reach back to pull the bastard off, but it was fast. It ducked her hand, or bit at her fingers, always clinging, always clawing.

The wanderer winced in pain as a sharp nail dug a deep gouge out of her shoulder, and she very nearly stumbled to the ground. She grimaced and threw herself back against a wall, slamming the creature hard on the wood. It screeched loudly in her ear, and through the pain she heard thudding above her - more creatures.

The woman swore again, this time jabbing an elbow hard into the creature's ribs. It gurgled some kind of response, and the woman felt its grip relax slightly. Fearing her lack of time, she once again slammed the mutant against the wall and then doubled over, yanking it by the face to pull it clear over her shoulders and into the dust below.

She pointed her weapon.

The walls shook.

Thuds arrived behind the woman and she spun on her heels. Two more mutants had appeared at the top of the staircase to her right and were

piling over each other in competition to get to the bottom first. They howled like skinny, rotting banshees.

The wanderer lifted her weapon a third time and the most eager of the grey-skinned pair fell backwards, landing in a pile of its own guts. Immediately, the other mutant thrust its arms in the air and skidded to a halt.

“Woah!” it yelled. “Time out, time out!”

The woman’s sweaty forehead knotted in a glare, her breathing slow, but heavy. Gentle wisps of smoke drifted lazily from the tip of her pistol.

“Who do you think you are, huh?” the mutant raved. “You come in here, shootin’ all my mates, thinkin’ ya own the place, eh?”

“All your mates,” she replied, panting slightly from the battle. Her eyes scanned the dark recesses of this wide space. “There are no more of you up there, then?”

“Naw, man! Ya friggin’ killed them all, didn’t ya?”

She narrowed her eyes and trained her weapon on the mutant.

“Hey,” he frowned, “put that thing down. I ain’t chargin’ no more.”

“Not right now.”

“Come on, ya can’t just barge in here, man! Mutants got rights. I live here.”

She cocked her head, ignoring his pleas to lower her weapon. “Did you purchase this building from the last owner?”

The creature gave a nervous grin of stained brown teeth, its misshapen eyes darting briefly to the bone piles and back. “Sorta?”

The woman shook her head and adjusted her aim to rest on the creature’s forehead.

“OK, OK!” it cried. “Geeeeeeez! At least let me vacate the premises first. Give a mutant a chance.”

“So you can return in the night to reclaim your nest as I sleep?”

It scowled. “Right, first of all, *nest* is an offensive term. This is a *lair*, thank you very much. And second, why don’t ya solve your problems with words, huh? Ya got all this shooty, grumpy adventurer thing goin’ on. Just say, ‘Oh, excuse me, Mr Scarclaw – that’s my name, Scarclaw, see I gotta name ‘cause I got rights, ya hear? – Oh excuse me, Mr Scarclaw, could you

please leave this lair at your immediate convenience? I would be ever so grateful.’”

She scowled back. “The last pack of mutants I did a favour for tried biting my arms off the next morning.”

“Huh, well it’s not our fault you got lovely arms.”

The adventurer readjusted her aim.

“Alright, alright, bad joke. Geez,” it replied, then it pretended to talk to an invisible audience. “What’s a guy gotta do to get a few laughs around here, huh?”

The adventurer continued to scowl.

“Listen, please, I’m just one mutant now, ya hear? If I come back, you can just shoot me there and then, no harm done. Mutant Bob’s your Uncle.”

Her eyebrows slumped further into glare territory as the woman considered her situation. Her ammo was already running low, and one more dead mutant was one more dead mutant she had to drag outside and clean up after. Was it worth the risk? It might come back to find her at night, maybe even with friends, but it really was just one mutant roaming the Waste, and a skinny wretch at that. It would probably get gobbled up by the next Waste Beast, or swarmed by a troop of rabbit-like creatures or something.

She stared at its pleading eyes.

It grinned innocently back.

She lowered her pistol. “Fine.”

The creature fist-pumped happily and danced on the spot. “Oh thank you, man, thank you! You won’t regret it, lemme tell ya. Just ... one thing.”

“?” she replied.

“Can I grab some of my friends before I go? Food for the road, you know how it is.”

She nodded.

* * *

Soon, the wanderer was alone in her new building. She stepped back outside in silence, into the grim smoglight, and gazed up at the rickety structure in quiet contemplation; her eyes were full of possibilities.

She had travelled to every corner of the Waste, seen every ocean.

She had traded with the Great Gi'Stor, Master of Many Small Souvenirs to the north.

She had crossed the Choppy Strait to council the wise men of Stewart's Island in the south.

She had fought off an army of man-eating trees on the One Acre Wall, single-handedly felling more of the horrors than any other fighter there.

She had saved people from bandits, mutants, robots, kings, queens, Waste Beasts, and even more robots.

And now, only now, was she finally satisfied with it all.

This was her new home, her retirement, her life-long dream.

This was her new bar, perfectly located along a lengthy trader's road.

Smack-dab in the middle of nowhere.