

THINGS THAT GO BUMP

By Duncan P. Pacey

Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer woke with a start.

His head pounded worse than that time Bonnie Hammerhands clobbered his skull in retaliation for when he shot her in the foot, which itself was retaliation for when she ruptured one of his balls by kicking it during sex - which, admittedly, was done in retaliation for-

-Are you gonna sit around all day and think about weird Bonnie sex or get your ass up?

Wolfcat flinched suddenly, the voice shooting a pulse of pain into his eyeballs. He rested one of his gloved, spike-covered hands on his bald head and massaged it firmly. The voices were starting to wake up, too. Brilliant.

Alright, don't milk the head thing, pal. It's not that bad an injury.

It felt like a bad injury. He had clearly knocked the side of his head on something hard. But what? And why? He glanced around the area.

The ruins of the wild Orcklands lay strewn in all directions, although he couldn't see far down the winding, narrow streets because the buildings huddled so close together. It looked like he had passed out on a pile of rotten bricks next to a burnt-out car, heavily rusted from age and torn apart by bullet fire at some point in its miserable life. Old World apartments towered around him on all sides, casting shadows over the messy street. Many of the towers had huge chunks missing as though giants had taken great bites and spat out the debris.

Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer squinted, trying to figure out how he had come to an unexpected sleep in such a lifeless place. Then he flinched again as the rhythm of his heart made the pain in his head spasm. He breathed slowly until it died down enough to look around again.

You really did a number on yourself, huh?

And he tried to ignore the voice.

Next to him was a half-empty sack. *Or is it half-full?* It was his scavenging pack, and it looked like he'd been out collecting miscellaneous shit to take back to his tribe before his little incident. But what incident? He wasn't sure. But it certainly involved his head, that he could be certain of.

Sounds like you're really struggling to get ahead in life. Get it? Ahead? Like, how your head hurts?

Wolf gritted his teeth and clumsily stood upright, taking his time as dizziness threatened to sweep him off his feet. *You're no fun sometimes.* His favourite metal bat - Manbeater - was lying at the base of the rubble pile, and, ignoring the voice, he stooped to grab it. Dust cascaded off his spiked leather jacket as he bent down, and more streamed off his patchwork, spiked pants.

Looks like you've been lounging in the dust a fair while. And to think Bonnie always called you lazy. What was she thinking, eh?

Wolfcat shook his head and bent down again, this time to grab his pack. It jingled and jangled, but it wasn't too heavy. Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer couldn't have been very far into his hunting before the accident. He rubbed his head as images of his boss - Sharptooth the Unlifer - drifted through his mind. The Unlifer didn't appreciate when his scavengers came home with nothing. He had earned his title.

So, with fingers wrapping and unwrapping around Manbeater, Wolfcat stepped slowly down from his pile of rubble-turned-bed and peered at the surrounding streets. He needed a few more shinies to take back, or else the Unlifer might unlife Bloodsqueezer, and that wasn't acceptable. Or he'd unlife his kid, to teach Wolf a Lesson. Sharptooth didn't appreciate children as the future generation, but rather as bargaining chips. He encouraged bandits to breed, "in the name of repopulating the wild Orcklands and making the Unlifers the strongest tribe", but everybody knew it was because mo' kids meant mo' bargaining chips.

You can't argue with that logic, though, Wolfie. Mo' bargaining chips, mo' power.

It didn't matter if it was true. It was still messed up.

The world is messed up, Wolfcat. But we do what we can.

Ugh, not you.

Yes, me. I'm just saying, the waste has always been buggered, and the Orcklands are like a condensed version of that.

Not the nice bits.

Well of course not the nice bits, but we don't live in a nice bit, do we? We live here.

Wolfcat sighed unhappily, trying to ignore the argument clamouring in his brain. Soon, he thought, he'd be able to leave the Unlifers with Wolfpup and start a new life. Maybe open up a food stall somewhere - everybody loved food stalls, right?

Blah, he mumbled. But first he needed a few more shinies.

He picked a random direction and started walking. By the looks of things, he was in an old suburb near the walled border between the wild Orcklands and Gachookland - a highly weaponised region of the city carved out for the zealots and fanatics of Gachook, Our *so-called* Lord and *presumed* Saviour. Wolfcat stared at a narrow, dark alley that would take him to the border and he let out another sigh. There'd be great shinies down there, but some of them would be spewing from defence turrets. The Unlifers had learned not to pick a fight with Gachook.

And then a glitter caught Wolfcat's eye.

He'd only made it a few metres down the road before he saw it. The smoglight, or whatever managed to drift down to the ground between the wild Orckland's skeletal towers, was glimmering off something in a nearby window. Wolfcat fist-pumped quietly to himself, still ignoring the fight going on inside his mind, and clambered over the street's rubble to peer inside and see what it was.

The window itself was hollow, glassless, and obstructed by debris. It was dark inside - very dark - but the smog's light was catching on what might have been some old weapons. A short, well-made axe, rusted with blood, was glittering on the windowsill. Wolfcat could easily take it, but as he peered inside the shadowy space, he saw a small cache of other armaments piled in the centre of the room. There were more axes, *boring*, machetes, *OK, those would be better*, and *oh goodness* even guns! At the back of the room were a few pistols and a handful of rifles, and even some more advanced weapons Wolfcat couldn't readily discern the function of.

Screw the function, we've hit the jackpot!

The pile was probably worth a small fortune. Enough to sell off to some passing merchants and start a little stall, certainly.

Wolfcat grinned widely, allowing himself a moment of triumph. But it soon melted off his unclean face as he realised what it would take to get at the weapons pile. He couldn't just climb through the window because of whatever debris had fallen to block it, and - yep, sure enough, the nearest hole in the wall was a few windows down...

Wolfcat took a nervous step backwards. This was the Waste. There was no such thing as a truly uninhabited building if it had four walls and a roof, especially not here in the Orcklands. There was always something lurking. Or rather, some Thing.

He turned away, his foot starting to tap anxiously on the rubble street. He'd have to scavenge somewhere else, there was no way he was wandering through a building that dark and foreboding without a better weapon than Manbeater. He also needed some body armour, and a few human allies to lead the way in case they were ambushed. No, he couldn't do it. Even the Gachookian border would be safer. He couldn't.

You could totally do it.

Could he?

Yeah mate, you're fast. Strong. Fairly agile. Agile enough, anyway. OK, maybe just fast and strong. But what else d'ya need?

Body armour?

Pfft, only pussies wear body armour.

A shotgun?

You don't need a gun. You've got sweet muscles.

What about human allies to soak up an ambush?

Sharptooth wouldn't need any allies.

Sharptooth is a madman who hears voices in his head.

And your point...?

Ah.

Hey, not to be a Kenny Killjoy over here, but...

Oh, for crying out loud. Not you again.

Wouldn't it be smarter to scavenge somewhere else? Somewhere less likely to contain traces

of Thing.

Are you afraid of a few itty-bitty Things?

Well ... yes! And so should you be.

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Mercy, who invited this guy?

This doesn't concern you, Jason.

Go away, Jason.

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Nice, Jason. Real mature.

Don't be an asshole, Jason.

Just go get the bloody guns, Wolfcat!

Don't get the guns, Wolfcat. You know it's dangerous. What would Wolfpup do if his pap didn't come home?

Wolfcat squeezed his eyes together and put his hands on his face, momentarily stowing Manbeater on a belt hook by his left thigh. The argument in his mind was making his headache almost unbearable. He was sure his left eyeball was about to burst. And all the while, a shadowy apartment building loomed in front of him like a gloomy monolith – a gloomy monolith that may, or may not, contain Things.

It was enough to drive a man crazy.

Just go get the guns, Wolfcat. Move quick and you can grab a whole armful before the Things even know you're there. Assuming there's even Things in there, that is.

Which there definitely is.

Which there might not be.

Wolfcat took a long, slow breath, his eyes still jammed tightly shut.

Don't do it, Wolfcat. Think of your pup. You've always scavenged elsewhere

-look where that got us-

-YOU'VE ALWAYS SCAVENGED ELSEWHERE. But it's never been an issue. Sure, we don't make too much money out of it, but we're alive, right? We're alive, and ... and Wolfpup has a pap, and, umm, and we're alive. Just don't get the guns, Wolfcat. Take the rusty axe and scavenge somewhere else. It's safer.

OK, that's it! I can't do this anymore.

Do what?

Why aren't you speaking anymo- Ack!

Wolfcat slowly took his hands away from his face. The wind chattered a quiet, high-pitched tune through the hollow buildings all around him, whistling and moaning as it meandered through bullet holes and rotten gaps. The repetitive dull thuds of faraway defence turrets battered the quiet, shifting air, and Wolfcat thought he could make out a scream just at the edge of hearing.

So much sound.

It ... it was beautiful. Tears brimmed in Wolfcat's eyes. The voices were so quiet. He hadn't heard this many different undisturbed ambient noises in years. He lifted his face to the smog and a smile touched his lips. It was euphoric, just listening. Standing and listening. Listening and standing. He sniffled.

OK, I'm back. Hey, are you crying?

And so it ended.

Suck it up, whatever it is. We're gonna go get those guns.

Wolfcat winced, expecting the other voice to offer a rebuttal.

Nah, he won't be back for a little bit. I dealt with that.

Dealt with that?

Don't worry about it, Wolfy. Just go get dem guns.

Wolfcat took a hesitant step forwards.

'Attaboy.

...and went to get dem guns.

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It was cold.

It seemed so much colder in here than out there. Wolfcat's breathing quickened slightly, little white wisps curling out of his mouth and fading into the shadows.

Boy, it is DARK in here.

It certainly was. Wolfcat could barely see a few feet ahead. Sharp beams of dusty smoglight cut through the air here and there like yellow lances, but - as weird as it was to say - there weren't enough bullet holes in the walls to offer any reasonable level of visibility. More bullet holes, that's what this place could have used. Most of the windows had been barricaded from the inside, piled high with old furniture and nailed over with mish-mash wooden planks. Whoever had once occupied this building *really* didn't want anyone to get in. And yet, Wolfcat wondered if they had failed, considering how he had just entered the first room through a gaping tear in the wall.

But anyway...

He was in a hallway. It was long, narrow and cloaked in darkness. Rooms splintered off from each side, some with locked doors, some with no doors, and one with a rotten skeleton lying curled just inside the frame. It looked like there might have been more corpses inside the room, but Wolfcat couldn't fully tell through the inky blackness. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

Pussy.

He walked onwards.

After a few moments, Wolfcat spied the room containing the weapons cache. *If I had hands, I'd be rubbing them together hungrily. Can you do it for me?* Cautiously, he peered through the doorframe and saw the axes, machetes, guns and Other piled untidily in the centre of the room. *Why aren't you rubbing your hands like I asked?* He could also vaguely make out a few other assorted goods, like scraps of clothing, backpacks, and jewellery. Despite the cold air curling in and out of his mouth, Wolfcat suddenly felt very warm. This didn't look like somebody's carefully secreted stash. This looked like a haphazardly discarded pile of inedibles.

Wolfie, if you're worried about ... you know ... why don't we just run in, grab a handful of those big fat guns over there in the corner - see them? Over there. No, left. The other left. The other left - grab those, and get outta here. Quick as ya like. Even a handful of these babies will make us rich, we don't need the whole lot.

Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer frowned. He could probably carry two or three of the biggest weapons and still be able to run. And two or three would be enough to escape the Unlifers...

He nervously stepped forwards.

But froze.

Another door flashed, and Wolfcat knew it was the one he should have taken. But by the time this thought passed through his brain, he was already another doorway down the hall and continuing at speed. *Woops, sorry.* He'd have to figure out a new escape on the run, or turn to face the creature and go back. He decided he'd rather not face the creature without armour on.

Pussy. But also ... fair enough.

And then Things got worse.

He heard more growling, more gurgling, coming from all around him. They were ahead of him, behind him, above him. Hell, he even reckoned he could hear some through the floorboards beneath him. The entire bloody building was swarming with Things, all crying out for blood with their rageful, terrifying screams. And every single roar was coming closer. It felt like the very walls themselves were pressing in, threatening to cut off any escape. He would die in this building, he knew it. This was it for Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer.

Shut up, pussy, and keep running! Nobody's dying today.

The hallway he sprinted down turned ninety degrees left and he followed it, practically skidding around the bend. He heard the Thing behind him run full-tilt into the wall, and a crash signalled it had ploughed straight through. The creature squealed, and Wolfcat momentarily glanced back. Should he turn to finish it off?

Don't stop, you idiot! Run while we have a chance!

Hey I'm back, dicks, and I'm pissed off at- HOLY CRAP WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?

We went to get the guns.

WHY DID WE GO FOR THE GUNS?! I told you this would happen!

Oh get off your high horse, and encourage this prick to run faster!

And so Wolfcat ran faster.

...straight into a Thing.

It was almost as surprised as he was. Wolfcat tackled it with his full bodyweight, not expecting the creature to step out of a doorway near the end of the hall. The pair spiralled into the dusty floor, him swearing, it roaring. The Thing was faster to spring up, though, rolling ungainly on the ground to land on a foot and mangled claw-stub. The creature gargled and lashed forwards with a bony spike, but Wolfcat rolled to the side with a fright, barely moving his head out the way of the attack. He felt the wind whistle past his ear and the ground thud where the spike struck floorboards, and then Wolf spun back and brought Manbeater down on the creature's malformed head in a big, heavy arc.

His whole arm shook from the blow as Manbeater's chunky wooden end cracked open the Thing's skull. It screamed in pain and rolled away, spasming on the floor in great, shuddering twitches. But before he could kill the creature, a whole snarling crowd of

Things burst through a doorway close by and piled over themselves to reach him. Wolfcat swore and scrambled to his feet, diving back down the hall the way he came.

It looked like he was going back after all.

That was my plan to begin with.

THIS WAS YOUR PLAN!?

Wolfcat ran, but he could feel his body getting heavier. Each footfall felt like more effort than before, his breathing was growing raspier. His slender frame wasn't used to such significant effort. The most exercise he did was walking and hauling junk, and although he did that plenty, it certainly wasn't like sprinting endlessly for your life. He knew he was slowing down, but he couldn't stop. He didn't want to die in some dark hallway in the ass-end of nowhere. He wanted to die behind a food stall, with Wolfpup by his side. His corpse would be the next day's special.

Shut up, nobody's dying yet. Just keep moving.

AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!

Oh for the love of- You shut up, too! Wolfie, just keep moving. One foot after the other, preferably quickly. Quicker! QUICKER THAN THAT SWEET MERCY GET A MOVE ON THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND YOU.

The scrambling mass of horrors was gaining on Wolfcat as his body slowed. There were so many Things jammed into the pile it looked like one giant, rotten ooze monster churning like a spikey river down the narrow hall. Wolfcat hazarded one brief glance back and wished he hadn't. Sweat dripped off his body in a constant stream.

He passed the ninety-degree bend again, and saw that the first Thing had taken a splinter to the chest and was dying in a small puddle of light seeping through a hole in the wall. But it wasn't big enough for Wolf to fit through, and anyway, he was moving on as quickly as he had arrived.

Soon the doorway he came from right at the start loomed ahead of him. He could see the extra pool of light spilling through the doorframe and cursed himself for not having noticed it earlier. Two voices in his head also cursed, and much louder. But not as loud as the shambling mass that threatened to overwhelm him, which was mere feet from his feet. Wolfcat, tears in his eyes, pushed and pushed, pounding on the floorboards to get to the light. Sweet sweet light.

He was just about to turn into the doorway when a hand - with four claws instead of fingers - grasped his scavenger's pack. It hooked its claws and tugged hard, causing Wolfcat to stumble.

Oh shit.

He staggered forwards, gasping and swearing loudly, shaking his arms out of one strap but getting caught in the other. He dropped Manbeater to the floor and decided to mourn for it later, needing to free his arms in a flash to prevent himself from being consumed by the mass. Whatever Thing had gotten in front of the horde and grabbed at Wolf now reached with its other arm, a knotted spike with about three smaller spikes and

two fingers jutting off the end. Wolfcat, quite drastically aware of the oozing horde mere seconds from ripping him apart, ducked wildly out of a slashing claw and stumbled a few more steps forwards.

The creature came in for another attack just as a second and third closed in to help finish the job. Wolfcat finally got his arm free of the last strap and almost screamed with triumph, narrowly avoiding a claw to the neck and taking the last few steps from the black hallway into the room with the hole in it, which almost seemed glowing with light by comparison.

Wolfcat charged through the small room and burst out of the hole, not stopping or slowing. He didn't trust that the Things would stop at the light. Everybody had heard the stories of unwitting escapees who had halted just inside a lit area, only to be attacked by a mass large enough that it could sacrifice a few Things in order for those in the centre of the horrible pack to grab said escapees and drag them back into the void.

The Things screamed and roared behind him as they encountered rays of light, the creatures at the back piling into those at the front without realising what lay ahead. Their rotten, pale flesh burned in the dusty beams and the Things turned to force their way back through the crowd and into the shadows.

Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer turned to look over his shoulder as he kept running, feeling a little tug of satisfaction that he had escaped. He saw the mass churn and roil, imploding in on itself as those in the front clawed their way back, and those at the back clawed their way forwards. But what had it cost? Manbeater was gone, and he still didn't have the guns. His pack was lost to the apartment building, which meant he'd be going home with nothing. Nada. Zilch. The Unlifer wouldn't like that. But he was alive. He'd need to check for wounds to see if he was infected, but at least he was alive.

For now.

Nice. Make him feel better, why don't ya.

I told you not to go in there. Unlifer's gonna be pissed.

Well nyer nyer nyah nyer nyer, aren't you clever.

Wolfcat ran a few paces more, still watching behind his shoulder, distracted from where he was going. Then...

His foot struck hard on a piece of stone and he yelped loudly, toppling over forwards onto a pile of bricks somewhere in the middle of the street.

The last thing he saw was a rusted car, pockmarked with bullet holes, coming for his head. With a clang and a squeak, his world went dark.

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Wolfcat Bloodsqueezer woke with a start...