

Beyond the Rainwall

The evening clouds swam through the sky, whale-grace guiding them to some unknown destination. Kiva adjusted her glasses against the spray. After a point in Greene she stopped hearing the rain. The wall that encircled Greene was distant enough from the town that it quickly faded into the ambient hum of the day. This close, though, the rain may as well have been a waterfall. The sound was piercing, threading its fingers below her scalp and squeezing. There was an old taste in her mouth—the light fermentation of breakfast—and she stopped, swinging the old bolt-action over her shoulder and swigging her canteen.

She looked toward the rain wall.

Close as she was, the rain was heavy enough that it looked more like a shimmering curtain than a wall. Or perhaps a mirror. The dayglow yellow of her rain slicker reflected off the falling rain in a way that made her think of television static.

“Flies,” her dad called them. TV Flies. All at once the memory came back to her and the sight of herself there, composed of Flies, sparked a forgotten fear. Those Flies had terrified her. So loud and bright, and yet she couldn’t look away. She knew they would one day swarm out of the television and take her. Maybe they already had.

Her watch buzzed on her wrist.

Break over. Another hour walk to the Stumps.

Happy fucking birthday.

She tried to adjust the coat.

She hated yellow, mostly for its association with new Watchers, and this coat didn’t fit right. It was too cold near the wall to unzip, but the constriction of her breasts against her ribs

made it hard to breathe, and the waist was loose enough for the chill to be a constant annoyance without presenting any real danger.

She continued on. At least Salma would be there.

She semi-consciously began to pick at the raw skin of her wrist. Scabs had begun to form from that morning and she wedged a nail under the flat of one and pulled it up a millimeter. The bite of it was addicting; the way it shot bolts of electricity into her heart. She often found herself picking whether there were scabs or not.

But, of course, there always were.

The sight of her arms always sent a bolt of disgust through her. The carnage was just an idea until you looked. Realizing what she was doing, she swung the rifle back over her shoulder and traced the old carved names of the other Watchers in the wood with a finger as a trickle of watery blood ran down from the irritated scab. It was disappointing—drawing blood; it focused the reality of it down into a caustic concentrate of loathing.

As if she needed anything else to accost her in the late hours when self-appraisal appeared like a menacing shape in a dark room. In those hours the void opened to her, reminding Kiva that there was always a Plan B—a pull cord for the abyss. All she had to do was take it.

She was nearing the Stumps.

A quarter mile distant, the tree stumps stood like half-impacted teeth, the last remnants of a great maw of forest split in two by the wall. It had been sad when Kiva was a girl. She'd tried to tell her dad using the paint-by-numbers logic of a toddler that the trees hadn't done anything wrong. Why did they have to kill them?

They helped the monsters take mommy.

Kiva stopped without realizing it.

She was shaking, looking at the smoke from the burn pile.

She took as deep a breath as she could manage, shifting the rain slicker with a sound of tightening rope, and checked the rifle. The gun fire off in the distance was a nearly nightly occurrence in Greene, and it always seemed to come from the direction of the Stumps. In the mornings when the smoke rose and the smell of burning flesh rolled over the town, everyone would let out a collective sigh of relief. Whatever they'd encountered out there, they'd conquered it. Sometimes, though, there was no smoke. Sometimes, the Watchers didn't come home to their family in the morning.

Kiva worked the edge of the new scab up into an angle and she flicked at it a few times before continuing. Smoke billowed from the tent Kiva and her Mom's best friend would guard for the next ten hours. Collin had told her as he handed her the rifle that they used to give kids cars on their sixteenth, not Stump watch. The notion seemed ridiculous. Even her dad only had vague memories of riding in a car seat, and all the cars in Greene had stopped working well before she was born. Still, the idea that, in another life, she'd spend this day somewhere else filled her with a sense of cosmic injustice.

Kiva moved toward the camp between the uneven rows of stumps that sprouted new growth from the trunks like little penitent hands reaching toward Heaven. Long sheets of canvas stretched up over a metallic cage to form what would be her home for the next fifteen hours. The surrounding stumps had been removed to clear a space around the size of her living room. Beneath the canvas, the earth was dry and a fire burned in a small hole. Canvas was pulled taut down the sides, forming solid walls that protected against the wind and not much else. Seated on one side of the fire, Salma wore her Senior Watcher's crimson rain slicker and tended the kettle.

She looked up and smiled. “Hey, kiddo,” she said, knocking her hood off in a practiced nonchalance. “I got coffee on.”

“Thanks,” Kiva said. She didn’t want to go in—wanted instead to turn and run the two hours back to Greene. If she went full tilt she could maybe make it in one.

“Well, come on in here out of the drizzle.” Salma moved her rifle off the opposing seat and produced two tin cups from somewhere in her slicker. Kiva did as she was told and sat, white knuckling the rifle. Sitting tightened the coat in a way that seemed to accentuate the proportions of her body that she was most ashamed of and she tried to shift her weight to loosen it. Salma poured hot coffee in the cups and passed one over the fire. “It’s gonna be a long night, hon, and I promise that rifle isn’t going anywhere.”

“What?”

“You’re holding onto that thing like it’s gonna fly off.”

“Oh,” Kiva said. She set the rifle off to the side and took the offered cup.

“You know, I had to wear that piece of shit too,” Salma smirked, gesturing at the coat. “I think whoever started the tradition found the worst jacket they could.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You can take it off if you want, kiddo.” Salma’s dark-chocolate eyes were warm and motherly. “I know how hard it is to breathe in that thing.”

Kiva unzipped it and quickly pulled her t-shirt away from the folds in her stomach to lean forward. “That’s... oh man, that’s better.”

“Just 19 more and you can pass it on to the next poor little shit.” Salma nodded to the rifle. “Did you find mine in all the scribbles?”

Kiva ran her eyes over the grain of the grip, searching. There it was, near the trigger, faded and with other names carved through and around it. And right next to Salma...

"Does your dad ever talk about her?"

"He..." Kiva traced her mom's name with her fingers. "Not anymore."

"I'm sorry, kiddo... He does his best."

Silence.

"So," Kiva started, swallowing the knot. "So, what is the likelihood that we see..."

"That we see something?" Salma smiled. "High. If I was a betting woman, which I was, I'd guarantee it. Now, as far as it being something we can't handle? Low. Real low. Most nights it's the smaller ones. Maybe once a month something a little meaner comes out, but as long as you're careful, those aren't too bad."

"What about... I mean..."

"The big ones?" Salma's smile fell away. Kiva nodded. "I've never seen a big one." She managed a sip. "If one of them comes out, you stay as quiet as you can."

Kiva sipped her coffee. She'd rather have had tea, but she figured if she sat on it long enough Salma wouldn't notice she hadn't drank any and she could toss it into the fire when she wasn't looking. "I thought Speaker Hamilton said to shoot—"

"No, listen. I don't give a shit what Speaker Asshat says, you try to shoot one of those things it'll kill you in less time than it takes to pull the trigger. You keep your eyes on the thing and stay as quiet as you can. Don't run, don't turn your back. Stand your ground, but stay quiet. Do you understand?"

"Yeah-yes," Kiva said. The tone had changed so dramatically that she fumbled over her tongue.

“Okay.” Salma took a large gulp of her coffee, shivered, and checked her watch. “What time do you have?”

Kiva tried to check her watch without exposing her bloodied wrist. “20:13.”

“Okay, good. A touch fast, but good enough. Finish your coffee, kiddo. It’s time to settle in.”

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“Feel that?” Salma asked. “Like electricity.”

Kiva hadn’t noticed at first, but there it was, the small hairs on her neck and arms stood up like static. Like TV Flies. “Yeah. That’s it?”

“That’s it. Something’s about to breach.” Salma stood and blew out the lantern. “Grab your rifle and follow me.”

“Right now?” Her voice cracked like a boy and swallowed down the fear that came bubbling up like stomach acid.

“No time like the present, kiddo. Come on.”

Kiva stood and in her rush to grab her rifle, she stumbled over the kettle, kicking it out into the Stumps and knocking one of the metal posts over. The canvas folded at an angle, collapsing one side of the roof.

“Jesus, be quiet,” Salma snapped.

“Sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry, just grab the goddamn rifle and follow me. We’ll deal with the tent in a minute.”

Tears welled up in Kiva's eyes at the reprimand. She blinked them away and picked up her carved rifle. The two walked a short distance from the tent and lay on their stomachs. The static was growing stronger.

"Okay," Salma began quietly. "Wait until it comes out. If you try to shoot it through the wall, you'll miss and lose the element of surprise."

Kiva turned. "What about you?"

"What *about* me? It's not *my* first Watch."

The damp earth had begun to soak through the front of her shirt where she'd forgotten to zip up the slicker and the rich smell of the soil burned her sinus as cold air forced its way deep into her lungs. She kept her eyes on the roaring wall and felt sweat run down her face, distinct and oily among the spraying rain. Her glasses fogged and she wiped them frantically.

"Whoa, calm down," Salma said. "Keep moving like that and you'll miss."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, a jaundiced light began to move somewhere in the rain. As she watched, Kiva realized it was impossible to pinpoint the source of the light with any accuracy, and she felt the static shift suddenly into a sharp urge to pull the trigger, to sabotage this encounter. It was a feeling that originated from outside herself but was nonetheless insistent, like the inner pull toward empty air when standing near a cliff.

"I feel it too, just wait," Salma said quietly. "It'll pass."

It shot out into the darkness on nightmare wings, amber light oozing from it in syrupy ropes, and Kiva fired from the suddenness of it. The rifle jammed and she turned to Salma, terrified. Salma levered the bolt for her and gestured. "Breathe. You got this, kiddo."

She took a deep breath and took aim, following the amber glow. She fired. The rifle bucked hard, slamming into her clavicle, as the creature made a beeline for Greene. The pain was

so sharp it stole Kiva's breath, but she nonetheless watched as the creature lurched and plummeted, seeping light flickering as it landed a few dozen yards into the Stumps. A gurgling, wheezing honk ushered from the thing and it made Kiva want to apologize for hurting it.

Salma patted her on the back. "Alright, bullseye, go catalog it and add it to the pile." She turned back to the mess of canvas. "I'll unfuck the tent."

Kiva stood, adrenaline forming an ice flow through her veins, fished out a pen flashlight, and started making her way over to the pulsing light. As she neared it, the same nasal cries of pain came from it in a flurry.

It was a swan. Or, had been a swan before.

Its head lay about a foot away, long strands of tarnished gold connecting it to the neck like loose guitar strings. The neck itself was ground beef from the impact of the bullet. The ribs of the animal had opened to produce the wings it used to fly, taut flesh stretching between the bone to catch the wind. Much of it was bald and a mucous like yellowed plastic coated it and pulsed with a steadily dimming light. The body writhed in the moist air and the head opened and closed its beak, honking impossibly as it reconciled the loss of its body. Kiva had to turn away from the smell that was coming from the animal. It smelled like the infected lesions her guinea pig had gotten when she was little. Strangely, though, there was no blood.

She wondered how much of the swan was still in there, behind the rolling eyes and pink, nubile skin. There was something terrible about it beyond its monstrous appearance and smell, like an intentional affront to the holy. It was as if the rain had personally insulted all of creation by twisting something so majestic into this hideously deformed creature. Its eyes met hers and she felt tears well up again. It wasn't a monster; there was no malice like she'd expected. It

didn't choose this twisted body. It was just an animal, tortured and confused like a junkyard dog coming to terms with a life at the end of a chain.

The strands of mucous connecting the head to the body began to tighten, dragging the head through the mulch toward the neck.

Kiva shot it again, obliterating the swan's head and winking out the sappy mucous.

Soon she knew this would lose meaning, that she'd become numb, but right now she would let herself feel this kill. Chance was the only real difference between them. The random collision of atoms and circumstance had put her on this side of the gun.

She bowed her head and cried.