

THE SCRAPS

We should have done more. More of us should have voted better. More of us should have gotten informed about more things, and realized that the problems were deeper than voting better. More of us should have protested. More of us should have realized that protesting was never enough and taken direct action. More of us should have engaged in mutual aid. More of us should have established a parallel system of power to show the existing one that we weren't beholden to a machine that was killing us. More of us should have a lot of things. Not enough of us did. Now I'm out here with Ash, picking up a few of the scraps of should have.

We aren't in a rush, too much. Ash saunters along the dirt beside the long blacktop road, and I don't hurry him. We got off the 94 a few miles back, after I'd stopped us to check the map and to let Ash graze in a not-as-common-as-before patch of greenery. I also gave him an apple from our supplies. Now we ride towards a line of dead trees, and a couple that are still green. The fields around us that likely once grew soy beans or corn now grow nothing. They are dirt parched in the sun, and I am grateful that there is an uncanny lack of wind today, because even a breeze would make this pleasant saunter into an ordeal.

We come up to the trees. Now that we're at them, I can see the farm up the road amidst another dead field. A mile longer. "Almost there, bud," I tell him. We go past the sign warning TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT. If there's anyone here to shoot me, I'll be surprised and then relieved before I die.

I am not shot. Drawing closer, it looks like the area immediately around the buildings has done better than the area not. Grass grows in the shade of the big red barn. I stand in the shade and look out at the vast fields. A river winds through in the distance. I can't see the water, but I can see the line of not-death snaking through the dirt.

I wander around until finding a manual water pump. It screeches at me as I work it, but it ain't broken. Eventually, a trickle of water comes up. I pump until it's run a little while, and then from a pocket of my cargo pants, I take out a test strip and run it under the stream. Ash is watching me. "We'll know soon, bud." We aren't in a rush, but if we can save time and effort by drinking here instead of going to the river, it'd be nice.

I wander around the outskirts of the buildings, idly holding the strip, whistling an old patriotic tune. When I come around the house, I snort in a laugh. In the field of dirt, there is the door of the missile silo that we're here about. It's painted to be camouflaged among grass. Swing and a miss.

Ash bumps me with his nose, and I reach over and pet him. I look down at the strip. I gladly let him know it looks good.

We go and get him some water. Once that's taken care of, I make camp, taking off Ash's saddle bags and pitching a one-woman tent near the grass by the barn. I have dinner—pickled eggs, venison jerky, and iron-flavored water. I give Ash a few carrots. It's getting to be late around this time. I wish Ash a good night, crawl into the tent, and conk out in my sleeping bag.

In the morning, I exit the tent to find a light breeze. The breeze carries the dirt, which pecks at me as soon as I leave the shield of the side of the barn. I take a paper out from one of the saddlebags sitting on the ground, and I sit with my back against the barn wall, studying the paper. I hardly need to, at this point. I've been to a copy-paste of this barn four previous times. But a little double-checking now could save me a lot of redundant work.

In the basement of this farmhouse, past a booby-trapped basement door, there is a steel wall with a steel hatch embedded in it, with lead lining on the inside and six feet of concrete behind that. Outside on the surface, comically disguised to look like grass, is a similarly impenetrable entrance. Ventilation, you

might have been able to make a drone that could breach through there, back when there were global supply chains connecting slave-mined minerals to tax-funded weapons manufacturers. But at a certain spot, nearer the silo than the basement entrance, is a point where the septic tank is only guarded by a few inches of concrete, and it's the best I've got here and now. I study the paper, a floor plan of this cookie cutter missile bunker, and then I go find my spot, squinting against the dirt on the wind.

I start digging.

It's getting late into the evening by the time my shovel hits the concrete.

I take the rest of the day to rest. We aren't in a rush. I'd rather do the next part unweary and in full daylight. I sit on the front porch, eating pickled eggs, still drenched in sweat. Beside me, I hear a meow. I gasp and scoot away. There on the porch beside me, a cat with long grey hair is walking back and forth over a little spot. I want to cry I want to pet her so much, but I'm also cognizant that touching the cat might not be wise. The cat's fur is tangled and dirty, and she is missing an eye, lost to a wound that does not look fresh nor well-healed. She seems old enough that she damn well might be pre-collapse.

I get up slowly, trying not to scare the cat away. I jaunt over to the saddlebags and take out a ring of keys, and bring it back to the porch. I unlock the house's front door. The cat follows me in, very vocal. I go to the kitchen, into the pantry, and hold my nose at the proliferation of mold. Stacked across one of the shelves are dozens of tins of cat food. I pick one up, check the expiration date, and marvel at how many years this tin would still be good for.

As I'm reading, she walks against my leg back and forth, meowing. She is definitely socialized. Almost definitely pre-collapse. I open the tin for her and set it down. She devours it. When she's finished, she comes and walks against my leg again.

What the hell, anyways. I crouch down and pet her. She begins to purr. I'm doing this for them, more-so than my own kind, anyhow. I want to get her to a vet, but I don't think she'd be willing to make the journey with me and Ash, and what few

professionals are left in the world are certainly not making house calls. Not this far out. I open some more tins for her.

The next day, she is waiting for me on the porch. I pick her up, put her in my tent, and zip her up in there. She is angry as I'm leaving but it's for her own good. From a saddlebag, I retrieve a large quantity of homemade explosives. I put them down in the hole I dug yesterday, make sure me Ash and the cat are far away, and cover my ears when the explosives go boom. Ash rears and goes running. I watch him to make sure he's alright, but he eventually comes around back to the farm. I give him some reassuring strokes, let the cat out of the tent, and then go to see the damage.

The septic tank was unused and I feel very blessed. I crawl in with a crowbar, bust out the toilet overhead, and emerge into the lavatory. I exit that into a narrow hall, a bunk room to my right, an office across, and to the left, the command bay. I take a narrow set of stairs down from the bay, unlock the door with a key from my ring of keys that I borrowed from far elsewhere, and enter the silo. With a screwdriver, I open up a panel on the missile head, and take out the payload, along with a few other necessary bits. I bring them outside, go far out into the field, and dig a new hole. I bury the scraps.

I leave the cat a feast of opened tins before me and Ash head off.