

THE MONSTER WAR

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excerpt

Here's a survival tip. If you're ever in a situation where you have to hike any long distance, don't take a duffel bag. Allie and Steve both put some clothes, water and dry food into their backpacks. I didn't have one, but figured my large gym duffel would be just as good. They tried to talk me out of it, but I didn't see what difference it would make.

I was in agony. First I tried carrying it by hand, constantly shifting from one to the other. I did that until I started to get cramping and my fingers curled up like claws. Then I tried carrying it with the straps over the shoulder – those net-shaped bruises lasted for weeks. I even tried putting both arms through the straps like it was a backpack, but it was too high and kept banging the back of my neck.

"You okay, JT?"

"Fine." I might be a dumbass, but I've got my pride. Stupid, stupid dumbass pride.

It all came down to family. My mom moved back to Ohio after I went to school. Steve's folks were up north, by Silver Lake. He had one sister in New York and the other away at school in Boston. Allie's family was in New Gloucester. So we headed for New Gloucester on foot. It was a twenty or thirty minute drive. We had no idea how long it would take on foot. I was pretty sure I would be dead long before we got there, killed by pride and a duffel bag. I was almost relieved when we got abducted.

By the time we left the apartment the sky had calmed down a bit. There were still the occasional streaks of light, and we sometimes caught sight of some of the bigger ships slowly cruising along, but there were no fireworks displays like before, and none of those big light/boom attacks. In other places the Air Force had scrambled fighters, and there were long, drawn out battles, but Maine was pretty quiet. There was a Naval Air Station in Brunswick, but the planes were mostly P-3C Orions, not fighter jets.

For about half an hour it was quiet. We heard some sirens, sometimes a gunshot or a scream. Once or twice the sound of music would come faintly on the breeze. Then we started seeing the bright beams of light, like pillars suddenly stabbing down out of the sky.

The lights were blindingly bright, like a flashbulb that never went out. They came down of the sky, and wherever one appeared the screaming started. We could see vague shapes in the path of the beam, twisting, small figures floating quickly upward. We hurried on as fast as we could.

"It's pretty stupid, though, isn't it?" Allie said as we left the neighborhood and started walking along a more rural road. "Flying saucers? Beams of light floating people up? It's like *Mars Attacks!* or something. Next there'll be giant robots piloted by little green men."

"Maybe there will be." I said.

"Come on."

"You come on. I mean, we've had bigfoot, ice monsters, now aliens. I don't know what's going on, but I'm not ready to declare anything impossible anymore."

"Yeah, but..."

"It doesn't make any sense, I know. And how come we keep forgetting stuff? That's

what bugs me. Shit happens, then it didn't happen, then it happened and more stuff happens. It's like reality can't make up its mind or something."

Allie nodded. "Like someone is tuning a radio, trying to find the right station."

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Allie called me a couple of days ago, when we started remembering all this stuff. She'd read this book about metaphysics and possible multiverses. She tried to explain it to me, talking about dimensions rolled up against each other like sheets of paper, which made no sense to me. Then she tried to explain it by saying different realities were like leaves on a tree. I asked her if they all fell off in the autumn, and she hung up on me.

I think her radio analogy is still the best one, though I don't think there's some higher power turning the knob. I think reality rotates, like a planet around a sun. As it moves along its path sometimes the signal fluctuates, sometimes we tune in other realities. I talked to one guy that summer that had fought in World War II, and he could remember fighting monsters back then; ghostly dragons chasing his bomber over Berlin. It had all come back to him as the monsters returned, just like 1997 is coming back to me now.

So yeah, I think this happens all the time. I think we tune into the monster dimensions and mostly we forget when the knob dials us back to normal. Sometimes things make it through, though. Sometimes people write it down. Gilgamesh, Beowulf, St. George. The story gets written and remains, but just as a story.

Kinda like this one.

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Steve did not contribute to the conversation, because he'd been eating junk food and drinking Mountain Dew pretty much non-stop since we'd started walking. This was his stress response, consuming junk food. He would eat several pizzas and drink a case of Dew before an exam. Never seemed to affect his weight, and I hated him a little for that. He'd say something, but his mouth would be full of Munchos, and he'd be incomprehensible. We'd started just ignoring him. So when he tried to warn us about the roadblock we kept walking and almost got shot.

The flashlights in the face and the sound of a shotgun being racked brought us up pretty quick, though. There were a couple of pickup trucks parked across the road. Several men in hunting clothes were either in the beds or standing around the back. One of them, a young guy in a brown camo vest and orange cap and holding a rifle of some kind stepped forward.

"Where you comin' from?"

Steve's mouth was still full of chips, so I spoke up. "Out of the city. Heading to New Gloucester."

"Yeah?" the guy looked us up and down. "Why you heading there?"

"Cause I've got family there." Allie sounded a little pissed.

"That right. Okay. Not gonna draw this out. You can pass, but you gotta leave your

stuff.”

“Mwaghff?” This was Steve.

“Yeah,” I said, “what?”

“That’s the toll. This is our road, and you want to walk it you gotta pay the toll. Sorry man, gotta look out for our own. It’s the end of the world.” The guy sounded almost apologetic.

“Yeah, I keep hearing that.”

One of the guys on the truck to the left, a big, bearded guy with a shotgun, shouted out “maybe we could work out a trade, though. You let us have the girl and you can keep your shit!” The rest of the group laughed.

I was scared, but more pissed. I wished I had thought to take the pistol, though what I could have done with it in that situation I didn’t know. “Seriously? It’s been like six hours since aliens invaded, and you guys have already gone all ‘rapist redneck asshole?’”

The young guy in front of us hadn’t laughed and he was sort of looking down at the road. “Just drop your stuff and get moving.”

“Now, hold on there, Abe. I think I just made them boys a fair offer.” Beardo climbed over the side of the truck and came towards us. “Only fair you give ‘em time to think it over.” There was some affirmative muttering amongst the others.

Abe looked up at us, and I could see he was almost as scared as we were.

Then Steve pulled the pistol out of his jacket and pointed it at Beardo. “I thought it over, and my *counter offer* is you let us pass, or I fucking shoot your fat-ass head off.”

I heard a whole lot of safeties flick off a whole lot of guns.

“Steve...” Allie said.

“No, Allie, fucking NO! I’m not going to let these fucking inbred asswipes think they can just, just...”

“Now, come on, STEVE. Listen to the girl. Ain’t no way this ends well for you. Got a whole lotta guns pointed at alla you right now.” Beardo didn’t really have a southern accent; it’s just how I hear him in my head.

“And I got just one, but it’s pointed at you, fatso. Whatsa matter, you couldn’t get laid when things were normal, so you figure it’s okay to rape people now? Huh?”

Beardo didn’t look happy. “You’re fucking hilarious. Listen, pencil neck, I don’t much care if she’s alive or dead, see?” He smiled, “I’ll do her just the same.”

I think it was the smile that put Steve over. I was looking right at Beardo, Steve’s gun just to the right of his head. I could see the hammer start to go back. I figured we’d all be dead in a few seconds and was weirdly peaceful about it.

Then the world went white.

I felt a tugging sensation, but over my whole body. It was almost like when you go on a roller coaster, and you hit one of those spots where the speed cancels out gravity and you start to float, only I could still feel gravity pulling at my feet. There was just something else, something stronger hauling me up. I heard somebody scream and thought that seemed like a good idea. I tried, but there was this enormous pressure on my chest, and I couldn’t get a breath. I felt something pull the duffel bag from my grip and felt a wave of relief. Thousands of fingers seemed to pluck at my clothes. Then the white light vanished, and I was naked, laying in a tangle of other people.

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