

The Seeker

By Rachel Aukes

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Imagine . . .

You never saw the end coming, even though all the signs had been there.

Nobody had. All the missiles, the technology, escalating global discontent. It'd been only a matter of time before civilization destroyed itself. Millions died on Day One. Billions died in Week One. By Week Two, you'd begun to wonder if you were the only person left.

But, others survive. Empty shelves and screams in the night are proof of that. The harsh elements peeled away humanity as easily as layers from a dry onion. Now you wonder if you're the only *good* person left.

"Stop it," you chastise yourself, the words echoing throughout the small shed. You know you can't allow yourself to get lost in despair, because if you do, you might never find your way out.

You've been at this location too long already. Every night the screams get closer and closer. It's time to move on, and you pack all your food—a single can of green beans (God, how you hate green beans)—into your backpack. You grab your crowbar and slide it through your homemade sling. A single bent bar of steel is your only weapon, but it hasn't ever let you down.

You climb to your feet and walk to the door. Taking your last breath in this small, safe place, you step out into the blinding, baking sun. As your eyes adjust to the harsh brightness, you see nothing has changed since yesterday.

A good omen for your journey.

Cockroaches scurry to avoid being crushed. They seem to be the only things that thrive in this world. They scuttle across you when you sleep. They taste awful, but they've kept you from starving. Paying them no further attention, you creep in the shadows of buildings so as not to draw any attention from far worse predators.

You walk less than an hour before a commotion erupts from down the block. A dog's barking drowns out men's angry words. An evil male voice yells, "Gut him!" A fray ensues. Careful to not reveal your position, you seek the source of the noise. You glance around the corner of a building and discover four men. You dive behind the remnants of a car before they notice you.

Warily, you peek around the bumper. A man is lying only a few feet from you,

unconscious, while the remaining three men are fighting. Two wear tattered rags and their faces bear war paint, just like the one on the pavement. Chills climb your spine. These are the *others*—the ones you know to avoid at all costs. These are the survivors who cause the screams you hear at night.

It's too dangerous to be here.

But, you don't move. Your body is tense, ready to fight or flee, as you watch the fourth man in action. The pair of aggressors keeps their distance, lunging intermittently as though searching for weakness. When one thrusts to skewer the underdog, their adversary dodges effortlessly and returns a jab to the ribs. The attacker falls back with a grunt, holding his ribs. The mongrel snaps at the man, who stabs at it. By the looks of the one on the ground, the loner may be outnumbered, but is in no way outmatched.

That is, until you notice the unconscious man is now very conscious and pulling out a pistol.

You spring from cover and bring your crowbar down with strength and accuracy. The steel connects with the gun wielder's head, and he crumples. You rush the fighter focused on the dog and swing at his thigh. It's a reassuringly solid hit, one that sends vibrations through your palms. He grunts and collapses onto his knee. The animal charges. The man blocks with his forearm and the dog chomps down. Somehow, the attacker manages to spin to his feet, tearing free from the dog and dragging his leg as he runs away.

The dog chases him, and you turn to help the man. But, as you suspect, he needs no assistance. With only a single opponent to focus on, he kickboxes his opponent's jaw. The man drops, out cold.

The loner ignores you, whistles, and the dog immediately stops and returns to its master.

Now, it's only you and the stranger. Tendrils of tension web in your gut. For all you know, this man could be a greater threat than the others were. He could be a cannibal. Still, you stand firm, refusing to run. You're no slouch. After all, you've survived this long on your own. In addition, you're gripping a weapon while he has only his hands . . . well, and the shotgun strapped to his back.

He still doesn't look your way while he checks the men on the ground. He takes the pistol out of the first attacker's hand, and you realize how easily he could kill you. The air in your lungs hardens. You don't let out a breath until he slides the gun into his belt.

He motions to you. "Come with me," he says with a British accent. "Their chum will return soon enough with backup." 16 4:43 PM

Hearing English feels unnatural at first, almost mesmerizing. After all, no one has spoken to you in countless days. You allow yourself to fall into step alongside him. After

an interminable silence, you ask, “Where are we going?”

“The name’s Tommy,” he says instead. “And, this is Max.” The dog wags his tail upon hearing his name. “Thanks for your help back there, Yank.”

“He was going to shoot you.”

“That wasn’t very nice of him.” Tommy’s accent is strong, and even though you’ve never been to England, he is undeniably familiar. You peer closely at the bearded stranger.

When understanding dawns, you stop walking. “Oh my God, you’re Tom Hardy.”

His eyes widen. “Yes, I am, though most folks nowadays know me only as the Seeker.”

Confusion furrows your brow. “The Seeker. Is that from one of your movies?”

Tom chuckles. “It’s safe to say my acting days are behind me. I suppose everyone’s are. No, being a Seeker is my job now. I look for survivors, ones like yourself.”

He keeps walking, and you find your pace again as the new information darts around your mind. “Is being a Seeker why you’re out here in the middle of the wasteland? I’ve got to say, I never expected to see a movie star around here.”

“You’d be surprised where I’ve been.” He stares off into the distance as though reliving some fond memory, before returning his gaze to you. “I was about twenty miles west of here shooting a film when everything crashed.” His gaze narrowed. “Now, to the more important question: What are *you* doing out here?”

You frown. “I don’t understand why that’s so important.”

Tom continues to watch you, saying nothing.

You shrug. “The same as everyone, I guess. I’m looking for somewhere safe from guys like the assholes we ran from back there.”

“Marauders. They’re a beastly lot. Desperate and scared. Makes for a bad combination. Best to avoid them.” “Like you did?”

He smirks.

You motion to the sawed-off shotgun strapped to his back. “Why didn’t you kill them? It would’ve easier and a lot less dangerous than fighting them the way you did.”

“I needed the exercise.”

Really,” you say with sarcasm.

Tom sours. “I don’t like killing.”

Four simple words. That’s all it takes for something to change deep inside. A tiny glimmer of hope grows. For the first time in a long time, you open yourself up to trust someone.

“It’s your lucky day,” Tom continues. “I happen to know of a safe place, with grub

and water and more than enough people to fend off unsavory blokes. It's a film set hidden deep within the old woods. We're rebuilding, one life at a time. It's where we're headed now, if you're in, that is. Otherwise, we'll part ways right here, to each his own. Your call."

Hope is a tidal wave, drowning your doubt. You find yourself smiling, the expression feeling almost unnatural. You nod energetically. "Hell yeah, I'm in."

Tom looks pleased, but Max growls. You look around to see dozens of marauders pour out from the alleyways. You recognize the man who ran away, limping as he comes toward you, his face masked with confidence and murder.

"Looks like their friends showed up," Tom says. "We might be fucked."

He motions to the nearest building, a toy store, and the three of you sprint inside. Shoes and paws crunch on broken glass. Tom and you yank the first shelf and topple it in front of the door. With hefty doses of adrenaline and fear, you manage to prop the shelf against the door.

"The barricade won't hold them for long," Tom says, and leads the way to the rear exit, only to find it locked. Max keeps looking back, snarling.

"I've got this," you say, confidence prevailing over anxiety.

He steps back, and you cram your crowbar in between the door and the frame. The men outside shout for blood. The shelf screeches against the floor as it's forced inward inch by inch.

Tom helps, and together you push the crowbar forward. The frame of the metal door bends. The lock snaps and the door swings open, only to be abruptly stopped a few inches out by a padlocked chain around the outer handles of the door.

"Damn it!" Tom shouts and unslings his shotgun.

Max barks furiously. Men are squeezing inside the store one by one. Trying to stay focused, you step forward to break the padlock with your crowbar, but Tom pulls you to the right, where you spot the stairs. Max needs no command and takes lead. You take steps three at a time. Tom's right behind you, but the mob is right behind him. He reaches the landing and fires off two shells in quick succession.

Caught by surprise, the assailants fall back, and the three of you escape into the upstairs room. You lock the door behind you, but it has no chain, let alone a dead bolt. A quick scan of the room—a supply room lined with stacks of boxes—reveals nothing that can quickly be used to fortify the door. You frown at your crowbar. A sense of loss nips at you as you angle the steel against the door and the floor.

The men outside pound against the door. "We'll skin you alive! We'll drink your blood!" is quickly followed by more vile promises and shouts.

Max growls, his fur raised. Each pummel and bellow is a shot to your nerves. Without your crowbar to grip, you find your hands shaking.

“There’s no fire escape,” Tom says from the back windows. He heads to the door, reloading his shotgun.

You run to the front windows, stopping when a label on one of the cardboard boxes catches your eye. You reach inside and pull out a smaller, plastic box. With a grin, you stuff it into your backpack before returning your attention to the windows and staying alive.

Outside, you count three marauders, all on horseback, none with guns. Newfound optimism strengthens you. “We can use the awning and slide down. There’s only three out there.”

“Three’s a lot better odds than what’s behind us,” Tom agrees.

You work at pushing open the window. The old sill protests, but it gives way to your persistence. Something massive slams against the door, and wood splinters. You raise your leg to climb out, but Tom pulls you back. “I’ll go first and take care of these buggers.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” you say quickly.

Tom shakes his head. “I need you to carry Max down with you. Don’t go until I call for you or if they break through that door. Can you do that for me?”

You swallow and nod.

“Good.” He hands you the pistol, then he’s gone.

You keep Max from following his master out the window. He growls but doesn’t bite. You position yourself on the window ledge and pull Max onto your lap. Above the commotion in the hallway, you hear a shout outside. You hold your arm out, aiming it at the door, while holding Max back.

Tom glances up before he leaps from the awning onto a horse and knocks off its rider in a classic Hollywood-style stunt. He takes the reins and twists the horse around to have it literally walk over its original rider, who screams in agony beneath its hooves.

He charges toward one of the other horses. Both horses rear before colliding. Tom hangs on and leans in while the clearly inexperienced rider yanks his reins, causing the horse—and him—to fall backward. The horse squeals before it lands on him, and he cries out.

Behind you, the doorframe snaps, leaving only your crowbar to hold back the marauders. Through a small gap between the door and the frame, you see bloodshot eyes focused completely on you.

“We’re going to have fun with you! There’s no way out!” one of the men taunts.

Your blood freezes. You clasp Max to you as you prepare to jump.

Outside, the third rider tries the same maneuver Tom had done moments earlier.

Tom yanks his horse to the side in time to miss the brunt. Tom spins on his horse and slams his shotgun into the man's nose. He tumbles from his horse to the ground. He groans, cupping his bloody nose, before pushing himself up and fleeing.

"Now!" Tom yells up to you.

"Hold on, Max," you say as you push off from the window. Behind you, your crowbar clangs to the floor, the door slams open, and you hear a cacophony of boots file into the room.

You're falling. You land on the awning and slide right off the end. You grab the edge with one hand while clutching Max with the other, but the weight and momentum are too much. Your grip on the awning slips, and you topple to the ground, turning your body midair to protect Max.

You hit the ground with a painful thud. The dog shakes it off and bolts from your arms.

When you move, your body screams, but you force yourself to your feet.

"Can you ride, Yank?"

You peer up to see Tom and nod. "I think so," you mutter through clenched teeth. He pulls you onto one of the horses before lifting Max onto his lap.

Angry shouting erupts from above. A man jumps, followed by a second. The awning shreds under the weight of two men. They tumble onto the concrete. One hits his head with a resounding crack and doesn't move again. The next jumper uses his friend to cushion his fall and is on his feet in an instant.

Gunfire zips through the air, causing you to duck. You look around for your gun and realize you must've dropped it when you jumped.

You grab the reins and turn your horse to follow. A marauder reaches for you, but your horse shuffles out of the way. The marauder grabs your horse's tail, and it kicks, sending him flying several feet. Needing no further encouragement, your horse bolts forward, and you hold on tight as it speeds to catch up to Tom's. The third horse has the same idea and trails not far behind.

You glance back to see men teeming onto the street, waving guns and spears in your direction. As the distance increases between them and you, their guns become useless.

After a couple minutes of galloping, the angry sounds fade, and your pounding heart slows to less terrifying rhythm.

The horses pant and Tom slows the pace. You ride up alongside him and eye him. "Let's not do that again."

“You’re alive, aren’t you?”

You scowl. “I had my doubts a few times back there.”

“O ye of little faith,” Tom taunts.

“We wouldn’t have made it except you went all superhero. Where in the world did you learn stunts like that?”

“I picked up a few tricks here and there. Funny thing, I’ve never been a fan of horses.”

“No way.”

“True story. I learned to ride while filming *The Revenant*. Never thought I’d use those skills again. Being an actor—or at least doing my own stunts—turned out to be good training for being a Seeker.” He motions to a junkyard. “My car is hidden over there.”

His last statement blows away any stunts he’d just done. You give him an incredulous stare. “You have a car? One that runs?”

“Aye.”

“But, I thought nothing worked anymore.”

“Some of the older stuff still does—as long as you take extra care with it.” Tom drops Max and slides off his horse. He ties together the reins of the three horses before tying them to the car’s luggage rack. He climbs into the driver’s seat, and the engine roars to life. The horses jerk and try to yank away, but Tom is there again, calming them.

“Can I drive?” you ask.

“No way.”

The rumbling engine entrances you. You lift the door handle and open the door.

Old memories flood your mind. You sit down with reverence on the dusty, cracked leather seat and soak in the dusty car smell.

You open your eyes when you feel like you’re being watched, and you find Max less than a foot away, fixated on you. “What do you want, fur ball?”

He replies with a whiny growl.

“Oh, Max, take the backseat already,” Tom says with a motion.

The dog lets out an exasperated grumble before jumping onto your lap and then onto the backseat.

Tom gets behind the wheel. He shifts the car into gear and creeps forward until the horses grow accustomed to being led by a machine. He speeds up ever so slightly so that the horses can walk a normal pace alongside the car.

With nothing to do but sit, you frantically scan for danger. When the lack of speed

gets the best of your nerves, you frown. “We should leave the horses. They’re slowing us down.”

“I’m not leaving them. They’re too valuable.”

“But, the marauders will catch up to us.”

Tom shakes his head. “I’ve seen the way they work. They’ll regroup, slowly, *then* come at us with what they’ve got. But we’ll be ready for them. We’ll beat them, just like we did today.”

As his words sink in, you realize just how lucky you are. “I can’t believe we pulled it off.”

“Yeah. We made a good team back there.”

“We made a *great* team,” you correct him, believing it. Then you remember. “Oh”—you rummage through your backpack—“I found something for you.”

Tom’s brows crease in confusion. “For me? Whatever for?”

“For saving my life.”

“That makes us even.”

You tear the item from its brittle clear package and hold it up. “It’s not much. It’s a bit silly. Okay, *a lot* silly. But, it made me think of you.”

Upon noticing it, Tom barks out a laugh. He takes the small Mad Max action figure from your hand. He holds it up and stares at it as he drives. As seconds pass, his smile fades, and his eyes glisten.

“It’s ace,” he says softly. “You don’t know this, but I used to collect these when I was wee. I had one just like this once.” He slips the toy into a pocket. “Thanks.”

“You’ll have to look harder to find an action figure of me,” you say jokingly.

“Challenge accepted.”

Time flies by as you enjoy the first real conversation you’ve had in far too long.

Only taking breaks to water the horses, Tom tells you about the Set, and you tell him how you ended up in the wasteland. Before you know it, the car comes to a stop before a tall fence with an overbuilt metal gate.

“This is it?”

Tom nods. “It’s the Set. Not the catchiest name, but it’s what stuck.”

He gestures out the window, and the heavy gate creaks open. The car creeps through the opening and enters a large yard. You see children running around, kicking a ball. Their laughs fill your rusted heart with hope.

Tom stops the car. “Welcome home.”

You feel your smile widen at the word. *Home*.

He turns to you. “What I said earlier, about us making a good team, I meant it.”

“Yeah,” you say simply. “I know.”

“Most folks around here have never even left the Set. It takes courage to be a Seeker. It’s hard out there and the days are long. It can wear down a person.” Tom pauses

for a length. “I realized today that Max and I could use a partner. How about it, Yank. Want to be a Seeker?”

You don’t even have to think about it. “You bet. But, I get to drive.”

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