

May 21 – 8:14 AM

I'm still in bed. I have just opened my eyes and closed them against the glaring sunlight streaming into the cave, another bright day against the gloom inside the cave and my own moodiness. What am I to do? My dilemma over food persists.

I've woken up every morning with the thought of a fresh new day, but I feel defeated for the first time today. The glaring reality of my life drags me down from any possibility of a mental high. Where is the hope? None except what I create for myself.

Lethargic without adequate sustenance, I weakly cast aside my "blanket" of hay and creep out of bed. At the least, I can freshen up and grab a drink of water. Then I'll see what I can do about food, if anything.

May 21 – 10:42 AM

I amble out to the threshold of my cave and stand there, basking in the sunlight. If I don't find any nourishment, at least I'll get some vitamin D from the sun.

I then proceed to the watering hole at the pace of a shuffled walk due to my exhaustion. Halfway there, it is almost a crawl. I'm not stooped on all fours, but nearly close with my upper body bent over and my arms hanging at my sides. I frequently support myself on tree limbs and brush. When I arrive at the watering hole, I am in for a surprise. Lo and behold, the wolf-dog is knelt over the watering hole, sipping from it again. I am surprised to see it again...alive. I thought it may have keeled over and died by now like everything else around here.

Immediately, my thoughts return to having the wolf-dog for lunch or dinner. But I'm not ready with any plans for a pit trap, not by any means. The next few moments, however, shoot any dinner plans I was entertaining for the wolf-dog to hell.

Standing there, self-righteous and indignant, I give it an annoyed look and snap at the animal. "Well? What are you doing here? Haven't you caused enough trouble? Get! Scat!" And I shoo it off with both arms, waving like a crossing-guard gone crazy.

The wolf-dog pulls its lips back, baring its fangs. My flagging and shooing cease. Displaying its fangs some more, it bends down to the ground and scoops up a furry body, which I failed to notice before, from between its front paws. It lifts its maw, clutching a dead rabbit between its teeth. The wolf-dog grunts or clears its throat, not sure which, and swings its head, tossing the dead rabbit at my feet.

Imagine my surprise. Did the wolf-dog just provide me with meat? The wolf-dog? Since when do animals do such a thing?

*Since it is also a breed of dog, my inner voice replies.*

Yes, a dog is a man's best friend, but this one isn't *my* friend.

*Well, it wants to be. Apparently.*

Nodding its head, the wolf-dog keeps an inquisitive gaze upon me, wondering if I will accept its offering.

I don't budge, still flabbergasted. But I blurt out, "How the heck do I know if this is a fresh kill or if it's a corpse that you grabbed from the ground?"

The wolf-dog growls, wagging its long bushy tail. Its gaze has a curious expression as well. No, you don't know but trust me, it says.

I ponder it some more, judging the wolf-dog's stance and look. How do I know if none of the creatures in this forest aren't infected with something? I don't. Maybe I already am. Enough already. My thoughts are senseless conjecture. I give up. My brain doesn't know what to think. I just have to trust the creature.

I lean down, retrieve the dead rabbit between pinched fingernails, and hold it before my face. I give it a sniff and it smells fine. In fact, it gets my glands salivating. I swivel my fingers, rotating the rabbit. Puncture wounds around the rabbit's neck have drawn blood, and they look fresh. So, the wolf-dog did make a kill for this quarry.

"All right, I'll take it." I drop my arms, clutching the rabbit close to my right hip. Its musky smell is making me hungry. I swallow my saliva down. "And what do I owe you?"

Straightaway, the wolf-dog twists about and plunges its muzzle into the thin rivulet that is my water of life.

"Ha! Ha!" I chuckle. "Fair enough. I'll call that an even trade," I tell the wolf-dog, although I cringe at the thought of the wolf-dog's mouth contaminating the water.

I wait until the wolf-dog finishes dunking its maw into the rivulet. Then it looks at me with that keen gaze again, expectant of something else. What might it be, I speculate.

I approach the rivulet with caution (I wasn't about to carelessly throw my life away after receiving an offering from the creature). The wolf-dog keeps its eyes on me. I get on my knees, splash some of the water out that the animal drank, and lap up some myself for a long drink, all in slow motion and with a constant eye on the creature.

In the back of my mind, I keep wondering. Is this it? Is this when it will attack me?

I finish my fill of water and straighten on my knees. I have to give the animal credit. It doesn't make a sound or budge from its spot.

What does it want, I contemplate again.

"Drink your fill," I state. I feel generous, considering the full-fledged rabbit in my clutches. The wolf-dog disregards my offer and keeps staring at me.

I clamber to my feet. I don't know what to do next. I turn and begin to push my way past the shrubs that surround the watering hole. For no apparent reason, I spin my head about and wave back with my left hand, "Adios! Hasta la vista." Don't ask me why I did it. I don't know why. Little do I realize that "hasta" will come sooner than I anticipate.

I leave the watering hole behind and straightaway head back to the cave. I am anxious to get back and have my first real meal in days.

No sooner do I press through all the trees and brush that form a perimeter around my cave than I discover the wolf-dog in front of the cave entrance. It assumes a nonchalant posture, its entire body prostrated upon the ground and that same quizzical look from the watering hole stamped across its face.

I am a little put off, to say the least. My brisk pace to a fire and a cooked meal has been slowed down by the animal. Never mind whom I have gotten it from in the first place.

"What do you want, boy?" I growl. Okay, I am more than a little upset. I am vexed. The rabbit meat is calling to me and I am in its aromatic, non-vegetarian, gravitational pull.

And yet, I am also surprised that the words come out of my mouth that way. It shouldn't have. I guess loneliness and solitude can do that to someone, make one crabby.

The wolf-dog catches on to the seriousness of my voice. Its ears perk up, but it doesn't move other than that.

"Okay, what is it that you want?" I ask, softening my tone a bit.

It bounds to its feet, its tongue hanging out, and trots into the cave. It doesn't advance past the threshold, but it is inside. It paces back and forth.

Imagine the boldness of the beast! To think that I would enter the cave with it! My rabbit notwithstanding, I am still frightened of the wolf-dog and its capabilities.

"No, you can't. Not in there." I march up to the entrance. "Took me long enough to find such a spot. Not that it is the world's most luxurious pad or the 'it'

place in town. Quite secluded and lonely actually. But it is *my* pad and that's the way I like it. Mine and mine alone.

"Now off you go." I dig my heels into the dry soil, plant my right fist on my hip (dead rabbit and all), and point off into the trees with my left forefinger. "Get!"

The wolf-dog keeps huffing and exhaling, its tongue lolling out. Its black eyes search my face for any sign of leniency.

"Scramb! Go!"

With its bushy tail hanging between its legs, it drops its head and whimpers. When I don't cave to its wishes, it bounds onto its four legs and comes right for me.

*This is it, I think. Surely, this is the end.*

When it bolts past me and sprints into the pine trees with a cloud of dust in its wake, I begin to doubt my convictions about the beast. Maybe it isn't as vicious as I have been thinking. I watch the dust settle after it.

I don't stick around to find out more. I stride into the cave, prepare and devour my meal, and relax. With a full stomach, my mind is at ease for the first time in a long time.

May 21 – 11:08 AM

Oh! But did I mention that there is always something in this cave which puts my mind at unease?

I'm going crazy, struggling with the horde of insects that skitter across the cave floor. I hate insects! As a matter of principle, I hate anything with more than four legs, one of Drake's rules of life. And being in a cave, I have a host of them to worry about: roly-pollies, worms, fleas, flies, mosquitoes, gnats, ants, centipedes, spiders, and beetles to name a few. It's constant war on my part to squash, squish, splatter, or kill them on sight. It's so hard.

Arrgghh!

May 21 – 11:30 AM

"Worf!"

After a delectable meal of fire-seared rabbit, I am lounging against the cave wall when I hear the bark. My ears are on alert, but I don't move a muscle. I am stuffed with rabbit and feel bloated after two weeks of near-starvation. I mean to rest and let my stomach do some digesting before I get up.

Or so I intend.

“Worf!”

The cave’s interior – wide at the threshold and less so at the back– amplifies the sound like a blowhorn in reverse, such that it intrudes into my time of sluggish solitude.

Alas!

Supporting myself against the wall, I slide upwards onto my feet and look outside my cave. There, at the threshold, stands the wolf-dog for a second go-round. I stride to the cave opening.

“Don’t you get the message, boy? I can’t have you around here.”

The wolf-dog bursts out with a series of yips and yaps. It goes on for several seconds. I can only speculate what it’s saying. I am amused however.

*Why? Why can’t it stay?* my conscience asks.

“Come on, I can’t take on another body around here. It’s hard enough to take care of myself. It’s nothing personal, but I wouldn’t be a good companion.”

“Worf!” it barks again. It splays its legs out, settling in for an argument. Try me, it says.

*The wolf-dog can come in handy, you know. Be mighty useful in finding food like it did today.*

“I don’t even know why you like me so much anyway. I haven’t been exactly kind to you.”

Hmpf! That is an understatement. The wolf-dog doesn’t even know a tenth of the imaginative, “wolf-dog meals” that have been running through my mind the last some days.

“Grrrr!” growls the wolf-dog, baring its fangs. It obviously doesn’t like to be reminded of our past.

“I know you’re not going to hurt me so that’s not going to work,” I comment, crossing my arms across my chest.

“I’m sure there’s someplace in these mountains that’s more cozy for you,” I state, trying one last time.

The wolf-dog ignores me completely and, without further ado, plants itself on the ground, right there at the cave’s opening. With or without your approval, I’m staying, it says.

“You sure are stubborn,” I marvel, shaking my head. I admire its tenacity, but more so its intelligence. I am in awe of it actually. It almost feels like carrying on a normal conversation with another human being. And that is comforting.

“Suit yourself. You can be my watchdog and guard the cave. How about that?” A guard against what, I don’t know. There is no one in these forsaken parts.

Finding the idea agreeable, the wolf-dog crosses its forelegs and lays its head upon them.

And with that, I turn around and return to my resting spot.

May 21 – 12:03 PM

I am sitting here trying to rest, but I feel restless. I feel bad about the way I have left the wolf-dog at the cave opening. I glance over at the front of the cave. Sure enough, the wolf-dog still sits there, moping over its paws.

I get up and stroll over to the fire pit that I have built near the opposite cave wall. It is nothing more than a circle of fire-singed rocks. I have erected it within the vicinity of the cave’s entrance so that the smoke from my cooking (which isn’t much more than an outdoor barbecue minus the barbecue sauce) has a means of escape. I grab some of the leftover rabbit meat that hangs on my wooden spit and walk over to the wolf-dog. It lifts its head at my approach and I drop the rabbit meat onto its paws.

“You deserve that as much as I do.”

“Worf” the wolf-dog barks once.

“I’ll take that as a thank you,” I say.

I turn then and walk back to my seat, laying back against the wall and straightening out my legs. I cross my arms across my chest and settle my head against the wall. I steal a glance at the wolf-dog. It is chowing down on the meat like it has never tasted rabbit meat prior to today. It must really like fire-seared meat (which is odd, I think). Bet it would love a real barbecue.

Appreciating my newfound companionship with the wolf-dog and the self-satisfied digestive groans of my stomach, my mind strays to other matters.

I contemplate about the Calamity and how it has changed the world. How it has turned the world upside down, really.

May 21 – 2:14 PM

After a while, I'm no longer dwelling on the catastrophes that followed the Calamity or the global situation per se. No, something else nags at me, something that's been tugging on my mental bearings ever since I got here.

And that is about *how* I have gotten here. Yes, I had trudged through the mountains till I found my cave, but I don't know how I have reached the Rocky Mountains in the first place. I don't remember how I have escaped the Calamity. Even worse, I cannot recall parts of my life before the Calamity, especially the life that I'd lived immediately before it.

My childhood memories are there. They come back to me like they were yesterday: spending my toddler years in Westmont, Illinois; growing up in Darien, Illinois and Downers Grove, Illinois; attending Downers Grove South High; enrolling for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; graduating with a Computer Engineering degree; and working for various global companies. All in the life of a human being, except I know there should be more.

I cannot recollect anything that has followed my career. Anything pertaining to that phase of my life has been swallowed by a black hole in my mind. I can feel it, pulling at the interior of my mind. The black hole threatens to engulf every memory I cherish within it. But I am not about to let it.

I am resolved to glean what I can from the abyss, to extract every last memory that I can from the vortex of forgetfulness.

No matter how long it takes.

May 21 – 6:22 PM

I doze off. The wolf-dog wakes me up with his incessant growling. My mind is so groggy that it feels like I am waking from an inebriated condition. My body is heavy and resistant to any movement. But the wolf-dog keeps growling, and then it starts yipping at me.

"What is it?" I growl back.

The wolf-dog stands outside the cave, its back turned to me, watching something. Its tail whips to and fro. *Real excited about something*, I think.

I get up and amble over to the wolf-dog, still keeping a distance between it and me. I am still bothered by the fact that an animal such as this would befriend me. Not unheard of, but not common either. Especially out here in the wild, hungry and destitute as we are. Nothing wrong in being careful.

I look where it is looking. And I observe a conflagration that lights the evening sky. An overhang of clouds covers the Rocky Mountain range, and from within it, a spectrum of colors plays out across its surface. Red, black, pale beige,

white, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple. Whatever can be found in the rainbow, it is there. It is quite the random haphazard light show, beautiful and electrifying. It reminds me of pictures I have seen of the aurora borealis that appear over the Arctic at certain times of the year.

But I cannot make any sense of it. What would create such a light show in the heavens, here in the Rockies? Is the military here? Have new aircraft been built for the domestic fleet or new spaceships been launched for outer space? I wonder with such questions and more.

Suddenly, I realize that I should not be outside. Don't ask me why or how I know. I just do. A dread. A fear of impending danger lurks inside my heart. So I rush back into the cave.

"Here, boy," I call after the wolf-dog. It swivels its head and meets my gaze. I beckon to it. The wolf-dog hangs its tongue out and huffs at me, dismissing my concern. "Don't worry about me, mate. I can take care of myself," that look says.

"Come on."

The wolf-dog gives me a drawn-out look. Then, all of a sudden, it turns and sprints outside underneath the maddening light display.

"No, boy!" I yell after it. The wolf-dog's swishing tail disappears into the wall of greenery outside my cave.

Unbearable anxiousness and dread runs through my entire body, dropping into my stomach and settling there. It settles in deep.

Whatever is going on, things are about to get worse. How do I know that? Again, I don't know. I just do.

*Somebody help me.*

May 21 – 10:41 PM

As usual, I eat my meal in silence, eating the rabbit leftovers and awaiting the wolf-dog's arrival. I am hoping to hear the wolf-dog's footfalls (or shall I say pawfalls) and its incessant panting at any moment.

Nothing of the kind the whole night. Just my bloody luck.

I get a companion, one that I hadn't sought in the first place but am starting to appreciate, and it leaves me high and dry for some lights in the sky. I guess my colorful demeanor is not that exciting for the wolf-dog after all. I can't blame it.

Anyhow, I'll wait some more.



May 22 -11:06 AM

I get up, forage for berries (which takes ages), and search for the wolf-dog a bit. Its tracks run everywhere and nowhere. It has backtracked on its own paw prints so many times that I find it difficult to get a reading on its direction. Finally, I give up and return to the cave.

It's still cloudy out there, by the way.

May 22 - 6:21 PM

Lunch is a failure. I meander through the forest looking for my next meal and I come across nothing but a grave of the forest dead.

Making no progress whatsoever, I then decide to go for a trek. I retrace my steps from the rabbit hunting the other day, and forge on past the clearing where I'd stumbled on the wolf-dog clamping down on the rabbit. I skirt down the mountain slope with the grace of an oversized ox that is unable to support its weight on an incline (by which I mean to say that I fall a lot). Luckily, unlike the ox, I am able to get back on my feet.

I reach no point in particular and browse around. The sky is still gloomy, a solid ceiling of clouds that barely allows any sun through it. I am unconcerned about the implications of that fact at the moment. I know I should be, but I'm not. Something had caught my attention when I was here last. I don't know what, but my mind had registered it. The temporary madness that comes with starvation had driven it from the forefront of my mind, but I had shelved it for later. And here I am to investigate further.

I scan the mountainside and peer into the trees. Nothing out of the ordinary. I amble towards my right (which should be east judging by the sun's position on previous days. No yellow disc to be seen today). What is it? What had aroused my interest when I was here last?

Then, when I am about to turn and head back, I hear it: an all too familiar sound. It is faint, but I can make it out...the cascade of flowing water. I pause to ascertain its origin and follow it. Such beautiful sound! I strafe across the ground like a spy. It leads me on quite a hike through the trees. I lose it a couple of times before I come across it again. But I finally reach my quarry some time later.

Secluded against the mountain face, an outcropping of boulders, rock, and mud bar my path. The rush of water originates from behind it. I veer left where the boulders end, and...

I cannot believe my eyes.

Amazing.

My feet teeter on the edge of a waterhole. It is not like my thin rivulet and miniscule pool. No, this is a real waterhole. Two streamlets that seem to gurgle out of the mountain feed the pool of water. The streamlets drop five feet from an outcropping of rocks and splash into a pool that is about seven feet wide. The water churns and swirls as if the pool's bottom acts like a funnel and swallows the water into the bedrock beneath it.

I still cannot believe my eyes. I don't know how I could have missed it before.

*Because you haven't come down the mountain this far, idiot.*

At this point, I don't care. I only care about one thing. And that is a bath. I haven't taken a proper bath or shower since...since...since when? Since I have woken up into this post-Calamity world, I guess. I've always been wiping myself down with my bare hands using the water from the rivulet at the other waterhole.

I cast aside my old, dirty, tattered clothes: shirt, t-shirt, jeans, underwear, socks, and shoes. That is an inventory of all my possessions, right there.

Splash!

I dunk into the waterhole and stay there for hours. Mmmmmm. Call me a woman for enjoying it so. So be it. I am feeling feminine today.

"Yes! Woop! Woop!"

I splash and play in that clear crisp water like I have done at the Raging Waves Waterpark in Yorkville, IL back in my childhood days. Raging Waves was one of my favorite childhood places. A passerby (if there is one) would think a group of children are cavorting in the waterhole by the amount of noise and commotion that I'm making. All in all, a frolicsome good time.

After I've fulfilled my bath and watersport cravings, I forthwith dunk my clothes and give them a thorough washing. I take them and whip them against the boulders that encircle the waterhole.

Whoosh! Thud!

My arm flings the clothes back and slaps them one by one against the rocks, the same way that mothers and servants do in India, those households who cannot afford a washing machine. I've visited many a riverside in India and seen it, especially in Kerala state.

Whoosh! Thud!

I imagine it takes the better part of a half hour. I rinse and squeeze my clothes out, shedding the running water in them, when a movement in the corner of my eye brings my head up.

Some fifty feet away, amongst the trees, a silver shiny bird hangs in the air and flits from one spot to the next. It moves like a hummingbird would, a visual fiesta of Mother Nature's stop-motion wizardry. At least, that's what it looks like from a distance. It ceases its suspension in the air and jolts to another location, closer to me this time. I squint at it.

It isn't a hummingbird, but a drone...more specifically, an electronic contraption mounted with bat-like wings. Bearing a wingspan of about three feet, the robotic drone glides through the air as it eases its wings. Click! Click! Click! Camera-shutter sounds emanate from its chassis. Red, blue, and purple lights flash across its underside. It swivels its triangular head and takes in its immediate surroundings. It is sweeping the area for some unknown purpose. It checks every corner of the forest, every nook and cranny like a mountain cat on the prowl. And that's what I begin to call it: the Prowler.

It is an unnerving, alarming moment. The drying hair on my arms and legs stand up. I can't move from the nervous shock that takes hold of me.

Plop!

And my immobility works against me. My wet clothes, bunched into a ball, slide down the slick rocks and splash into the water. It doesn't create a loud splash, but it is audible to the Prowler. The Prowler's head rotates in the direction of the waterhole.

"Uh!" I gasp.

Something tells me that I should not let it find me. I take a gulp of air and immerse into the water, seizing my wad of clothes and taking them down with me. Realizing their color might stand out, I shove them beneath my butt and legs. Just in time.

The Prowler skims to the waterhole and hovers in the air over it. My blurred eyes watch it through the water's surface. I can make it out with its array of bright lights.

*Geez! This thing is cataloging everything in its path.*

Is this some search engine company's pet science project? They've cataloged everything else in the world from hiking trails to biking paths to streets to ocean shipping lines. Why not the crooks and crannies within the mountains? Or is the Prowler something more sinister? I figure the latter from the looks of it.

*There's no way that it can capture my image through the water. Can it?*

I plunge further into the waterhole, as far as I can go and as slowly as I can sink. I discover that the waterhole is only about five feet deep. I revert to a lying position and let myself sink further, the clothes still under me. My movements must

have disturbed the water or caused bubbles in the water, because the Prowler dips closer towards the water.

I dare not risk it. I creep towards the clump of weeds and tall grasses at the waterhole's edge and take shelter amidst them.

*Hmph! Let it try now.*

I agitate the vegetation and a group of small fish, mollies or groupers or something, bursts from the reeds and swims away. Immediately, the Prowler hovers over the fish. I witness more lights flashing on its underbody.

So it can pick up something through the water. Infrared? X-ray? Whatever it is, it isn't good news for me. I am running short on air. I need to return to the surface and get more.

*Please go away, I scream in my mind. Please go away!*

The Prowler hovers over the other end of the waterhole. *Just a gulp*, I think. I push upwards and stick my nose out through the greenery. I suck in a bit of air, but the Prowler is on to me. It shoots over to my side again. I submerge beneath the water.

*Damn! Go away!*

I remain still, infused with some fresh air but still short on it. I compose myself and control my frenetic thoughts, anything to gain myself a little more time of being underwater.

The Prowler descends amongst the reeds, angling left and right to squeeze into the tall grasses.

I cannot hold out for much longer. I clutch my chest.

The Prowler descends to the water, as close as it can get. I swim to another area amongst the reeds.

*What a persistent bugger!*

My air is just about spent. Bubbles rise from my mouth.