

## Scavengers

Alicia wasn't the best friend I had, but she knew how to talk to people.

I had seen her get out of parking tickets, jury duty... things you were supposed to accept and give it up. Not Alicia, though. Alicia always knew how to get her way.

"You made me!" She was whining at the moment, on the verge of shouting.

We had left the bar, the seventh one tonight, just after last call. The parking lot we were standing in was built against the edge of the valley. The asphalt had started to droop, and several parking spaces were practically hanging off the side. All that was holding it to solid ground was a safety railing.

Alicia was pointing over that safety railing into the darkness, down a ravine that was probably littered with condoms, used syringes and serial killers.

"You threw your keys all by yourself! Why do I have to go get them?" I was never the courageous type, especially when it came to standing up to Alicia. And the last thing I wanted to do right now was argue. This section of the city

was the scariest thing I'd ever seen in my short, pathetic life.

Alicia worked better with an audience, and the three guys she had picked up tonight were a willing one. I looked over at them hoping for someone to help me out. But they were content to stay on solid ground and watch Alicia stumble around in her tiny, leopard-print miniskirt.

"I'm tired..." she pouted, leaning her shoulders back against the blonde guy's chest. He smiled and grabbed her tit, tongue between his teeth. She didn't seem to notice as she languidly looped an arm over his neck. "I've been up all night. Don't be an ass."

"But I've been up all night too!"

"Hey, get a move on. Andy's only emceeing until 3am." The redhead said.

"Yeah, you're making us miss Andy." Alicia mimicked, and then squealed as the brunette snuck in and grabbed her ass. "Stop it!"

"I don't care about some DJ, I want to go home!" I said.

I had been saying that since 9PM, when Alicia had done body shots with an underage cheerleader from the suburbs. Alicia had ignored me then too.

Even for her, she wasn't being a very good host tonight.

"Fine." She said, pouting. "If you really want to go home, I guess we gotta go. But you still got to get the keys."

"Hey... are you guys OK?"

We all turned and looked up at the same time. It was the bartender, coming down the hill. I recognized the tribal tattoo that encircled his shaved head.

"Yeah!" Alicia said, sticking one unsteady arm straight up in the air in a drunken greeting, "Just great!"

"Why can't one of the guys get them?" I asked.

"Because you didn't think I could drive!"

I was never trying to get Alicia's keys away from her again. A car crash would have been better than putting up with her.

"C'mon! People keep coming down here! Do you want me to explain why we can't leave?" I saw them over her shoulder. It was a group of guys, big ones. I hadn't seen them before, but they seemed real interested in what we were doing.

The guard rail, on closer inspection, was as filthy as it looked. I went over it one leg at a time, my heels

already slipping on the wet cigarette butts. As soon as I stepped off the asphalt my feet sunk into the mud.

It had been raining on and off for days. Everything was wet, slimy and growing mold.

I moved down the hill taking careful step after careful step, clutching at the strap of my purse like a lifeline. Every step I took sunk my feet deeper into the mud, the brown stains climbed up my knees. It smelled like someone had used the valley as a toilet.

Halfway down, I found a way to trip and went down hard. I slid the rest of the way down, screaming the entire way.

When I stopped at the bottom, I was covered filth. I could hear Alicia's sexless hyena laugh up on the road.

I had lost one of my heels somewhere in the fall. I had lost both of my colored prescription contacts too, the ones that had cost me an arm and a leg.

It started to rain.

I fumbled around in my bag, trying to find my glasses. I hadn't packed the new ones for some reason, but I managed to find an older pair. They fogged up as soon as I put them on.

I found the keys in a puddle on the road that ran along the valley floor. The metal was glowing in the low

light and the day-glow orange garland was visible even down here.

Something growled softly.

I looked up.

An enormous rottweiler gracelessly lumbered out of the shadows. No warning, no bark, no nothing. It was just suddenly there, drooling a few feet from me.

With a yelp, I scrambled backwards and ended up in a thick puddle of mud.

The dogs yellow eyes looked me over.

It turned, saw the keys, and a huge, happy tongue dangled out of its mouth. The monster carefully picked them up in its mouth, and then lumbered back from whence it came, as casual as you please.

I could see the orange garland bobbing out of its mouth as they both disappeared.

Gentle thunder rolled overhead, and the rain started to come down hard.

I leaned against the hill, fighting the urge to sob.

I told myself I would crawl back up and tell Alicia we were going home in a cab. I told myself that she would know, even in her drunken state that she had messed with me for the last time. I told myself that I wasn't going to take it.

I told myself a lot of things.

Over the roar of the rain against, Alicia's laugh landed on my ears like a sandbag.

I heard a new set of voices drifting down from the Parking Lot above. They were men's voices, deep and gravelly.

I heard my name, "down there a while" and "moron".

I could feel my lip quivering as I picked myself up and followed the hellhound.

I followed the dog for a long time. We walked along the wet, crumbling, asphalt road that had been carved out of the side of the valley.

There was more than one big road running through this part of the city, bridges to cross the valley were frequent. They seemed to get bigger the further we went.

We finally came to a massive bridge with several highways running over it. The sound of tires on concrete echoed around you like an alien language.

Underneath the big bridge on our road was an old, run-down house. It looked like it had been there for years before the highway had been built around it. Dirty yellow light was streaming out of the open front door.

The dog lumbered up the stairs and slipped inside. I followed as best I could.

There was a woman there, sitting next to an old table, close to the doorway. The table had three chairs, though none of them matched. She was much older than me, but her hair was still a young shade of brown. Her black eyes were tiny, deep-set, and intelligent. She wore the straps of the sleeveless shift around her shoulders. Her long, bony fingers had tobacco stains and a cigarette was perched in her left hand. She saw the dog first and stroked her misshapen head with familiar warmth.

"Hey, there's my Sunny-girl. How you doing tonight?" she asked. "You got something there?"

She tried to force the keys out of the dog's mouth, but the dog walked away, clearly uninterested.

"Yeah, well, don't go digging up my flower beds again." She gave the dog a slap on its hindquarters as it passed by.

She noticed me a second later and smiled politely, like mom did whenever we had company over.

"Well, now," she said conversationally, as she tapped ashes onto the floor, "Don't you just look like a half-drowned rat."

I wasn't sure how to answer, so I didn't say anything.

"Are you waiting for an engraved invitation? Come on in before you drown the rest of the way."

I limped inside.

The room wasn't exactly a living room and it wasn't exactly a kitchen. There was a sink, stove and old-time fridge at one end of the room, a stained couch against the wall at the other. The floral wallpaper that rose above the splintering baseboards was yellow with grease. The floor's huge pink and green tiles were stained with several decades of dirt.

It was the ugliest room I had ever seen in the ugliest house I had ever seen.

The woman looked me over and gave me a hand towel that wasn't clean. I took it with two fingers, unsure of what to use it for.

"Wipe yourself off, girl. You're soaking up my floor."

I looked down and saw the dirty puddles of water collecting under me. I made a feeble attempt to dry off.

"Now where did you come from?" she asked.

I sat down in what I thought was the cleanest of the two empty chairs. "I lost... my car keys. I was in this parking lot and... I saw them fall over the side."

"Coming down here's a long way to go just to get your keys."

"I think your dog has them. I kind of followed her here."

Something changed in her expression. I was afraid she just realized I was going to be easy pickings. I knew I would be.

"You came down the earth, through water to find metal." She said, quietly.

". . . y-yeah?"

"And Sunny found you. She loves shiny objects. You wouldn't imagine how useful it is down here. People throw away the strangest things."

Sunny? I realized she must have meant the dog. But who would name a Rottweiler 'Sunny'?

"Can you get them back?" I asked.

"She'll give 'em back when she's bored with them. Shouldn't be too long, but I wouldn't try to get them now if I were you. Can I get you something to drink?"

I looked at the cup of tea she was drinking, the greasy bits of leaves floating on top of the muddy water. "No thanks."

"Suit yourself." Her fingers played against the edge of a deck of oversized cards, almost considering, before she picked them up, and began shuffling fiercely. "You ever use the tarot?"

"I played with an Ouija board once when I was at a sleepover."

"Not the same thing," she grinned. She handed me the cards before I could protest, like a dare. She slapped her hands together like she was knocking off dust. "Here. You shuffle for a while. I've had nothing but bad luck all week."

I shuffled them the best I could. I made to hand them back to her, but she held up a hand and stopped me. "Pick three."

"Three?"

"Cards. Any ones you like." She watched me pull the first one. "No, no. Not like that, don't pull them right off the top, take them from the entire pack." I pulled the rest from the center. "That's it. Now put them in a straight line. Good. All right, let's see what you've got."

She turned over the card to her far left. She didn't seem to be happy. She was expectant somehow, but not happy.

"All right, this is for your past. This card's the Hermit. The Hermit rules knowledge, study... Are you a student?"

"I'm sort of... taking a semester off, you know?" I said.

"Mmmhmm." She looked more at the card than at me, "Why were you keeping to yourself?"

I don't know why the question annoyed me the way it did. Maybe it was because she sounded like mom.

"I'm not alone!" I exploded, "I've got friends! Plenty of them! I've got friends waiting for me with -"

"I know, child. Calm down... I asked why you WERE keeping to yourself."

"Oh." I felt myself blush. "Well, I'm not really good at... social stuff."

"Yeah, I can see that. Anyone could."

I sputtered, trying to think of something I could say in my defense. She calmly stabbed out the spent cigarette on the corner of the table and turned over the middle card. Again, there was that... odd expression. "This one tells about what's happening right now. You see it?"

I didn't know any of these cards, but I had seen this one somewhere.

"It's the Fool," she said, shaking her head, like it was all my fault. "It means you're acting ignorant and making bad choices."

"I don't think that's true." I protested. "I'm smart enough."

She gave me a look. "Sweetie, all the book-learning on God's green earth doesn't mean shit if you've got no common sense." She angrily jammed a new cigarette between her lips

and fiercely lit it. "Smart enough." She snorted, blowing an angry cloud of smoke right into my face. "Tell me that you showing up on my doorstep weren't a result of one of your good decisions."

I looked at the stains on the tabletop. "I didn't have another choice."

"One of your friends told you that?" she asked, angrily stabbing at the Hermit Card, "They brought you out of hiding just to push you off a cliff? They'd rather put your ass in harm's way than call Triple-A? Shit. If you keep acting that way, you'll be in serious trouble."

"But I'm not in any trouble!" I protested, "I'm fine!"

She looked at me like a microscope, exhaled smoke thoughtfully. "... be out of her depth in a kiddie pool..." she muttered to no one in particular. She shook her head, looking down at the last, unseen card.

I was getting fed up with all of this. If I had wanted someone to insult me and make veiled remarks about a horrible future, I'd talk to Alicia. I reached out and turned the card over myself.

It was Death.

Death.

But the woman seemed to be relieved. "Praise God," She was grinning. Not smiling, grinning like someone who just

gotten the punch line of an old inside joke. "You know, I almost thought you were a goner, I really did. But I guess there might be some time to beat some sense into you yet."

I had gotten past 'dumbstruck' and was going screaming into 'scared'. "What are you talking about? I pulled the Death card! Isn't that the worst card in the deck?!"

"Oh honey, there's things far worse than death. You're just too young to know it." She pointed one finger at the cards. "It's reversed. It's in a different position than the rest of the cards, understand? And when Death is reversed, it means a near-miss. Worst comes to worse it could eat you up if you don't let yourself get over it. But you're young enough to forget what's coming. I sure as hell I don't envy what you'll be going back to, but at least you got out alive. More than most people I've seen can say."

"What are you talking about?"

The woman shook her head. "You might be one of the few people I've seen who needs this. Nothing else on this earth is going to make you grow up."

Sunny the Rottweiler padded up to me, whimpering.

I recoiled, but she mournfully put her head on my knee and regurgitated Alicia's garland onto my thigh, wet with drool and muck.

"Well. Looks like it's about time you left. I know they're looking for you."

"Yeah... Yeah, I think that's a good idea." I got up, unsure, and pinching the slimy thing between two fingers, and began to leave.

"You're welcome, by the way." The woman said.

I paused at the doorway, and thought about saying something, but there didn't seem to be a point.

Sunny followed me back to the hill, a few steps behind. As I got closer, I saw blue and red lights flashing in the parking lot.

The big dog suddenly turned and left.

Getting back up the side of the valley was worse than going down it, but I finally made it to the top and pulled myself up with both hands.

Somebody saw me and the yelling started.

I couldn't see what was going on, but there were sets of hands that kept pulling me across the parking lot.

"Where's Alicia?" I asked, yelling over the noise. Nobody seemed to hear.

I was sat down in an ambulance, someone wrapped me in a blanket and gave me coffee. The bartender was there too, resting a grey blanket. He had fresh cuts and huge bruises along with a nasty black eye. He wouldn't stop staring at me, and I wondered how bad I looked.

Some cop, a human brick wall who was wearing his badge on a medallion, came over. "How are you?"

"I'm fine! I wish she hadn't called the police. This is just like Alicia! I didn't mean to drag you guys out here. I know she likes to be dramatic, but I don't think I was gone that long. If she wanted to get home on time, she didn't have to call you."

"Miss, what happened tonight?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing, except the worst girl's night out I've ever had! Alicia drags me to all these bars—"

"Alicia was the name of the other girl?"

"You mean she hasn't told you a thousand times already? She probably left out the fact that she made me go down into the hill to get her stuff. This is the last time I try to argue with her when she's too drunk to drive!"

"Are you saying that you intended to go into the valley?"

"Yeah, she had one of her tantrums, threw the keys over the side." I looked at the half dozen police cars

assembled. A couple officers were spreading a tarp over the open door of our car. "She can be such a brat. You know sometimes..." I watched them unroll yellow crime scene tape, cornering our car off from the rest of the lot. There were sheets here and there, draped over something. A couple paramedics were waiting, just on the other side of the police tape.

They had a stretcher with an empty body bag thrown over it.

"... s-sometimes I don't know why... I ... put up with..."

I found I couldn't finish.