Glass Castles

I watch him.

That is what I do. It is what defines me. My day is structured around him, his movements, his actions, his whims; they become my orders. He lives on the ninetieth floor, apartment 1902, west-facing with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. He lives alone.

I watch him shrug off his sleep shirt and toss it onto the bed. I can see the dark inking over his left shoulder and bicep, vivid black lines clear even from this distance. He picks out a shirt for the day, the blue one with thin white stripes, and goes into the kitchen to make breakfast.

He cooks himself an egg white omelet, some toast with jam, and a glass of juice. From my spot across four lanes of traffic and two stories above, I rip open the plastic wrapping on an energy bar, down a bite, and try not to feel envious. I watch him eat. I take another bite of the dry, crumbling bar and chew slowly, willing it down.

He switches on the TV and watches it for a few minutes before clearing away his dishes and re-entering his bedroom. He brushes his teeth, proceeding to grab his jacket and bag before leaving his apartment.

I wait silently for exactly nine minutes before I see the door of the underground parking garage open, his car driving up the ramp and merging with the morning rush sluggishly flowing beneath my window. I watch him until I can no longer see him. Only then do I move.

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My first kill was been a skinny hare that was barely two summers old. I got it in the eye with a pebble and a slingshot. My father skinned it and gutted it and it went in the stew for dinner. I still remember the taste of it: tough and gamey with a wildness that came with killing and eating one of nature’s own. I rushed to the bathroom after and retched, throwing up the contents of my stomach. I felt weak and tired and fell asleep right on the bathroom floor. The next week I got a quail. This time it was easier, I could almost pretend it was just a store-bought chicken, only slightly darker and leaner than the usual fare.

My stomach rolled violently and protested with each bite I choked down, but I ate the whole thing. I didn’t even need to throw up afterwards. By the time I was seventeen I had taken down a full sized buck, gutting it and skinning it myself as well. I had lain in the bush for hours that day, waiting for something to wander by. My back was aching and my stomach was damp where it pressed against the exposed earth. When I saw it my finger froze on the trigger.

The creature was beautiful, its coat glossy and its eyes were dark and liquid. It had already shed its spring time velvet and its antlers stood tall and proud, the sunlight dappling through the trees made the animal seem all the more magical.

Then I pulled the trigger.

The trees rustled loudly as every bird in the area fled. Brilliant red spread down the front of the buck’s neck, staining its dappled coat. Its front legs gave out first and it tumbled to the ground. The animal struggled for a few minutes. Its legs worked weakly, still struggling to flee even as it bled out on the forest floor. The buck eventually stopped fighting and its body fell limp.

I suspended the carcass from a tree and cut open its abdomen, the hunting knife splitting the skin and parting the flesh with almost no effort. Its guts fell out cleanly, wet and glistening, red and purple. I drained what was left of the blood before skinning the animal and cutting it apart into manageable chunks. I had left the head intact to be mounted. I paused and looked into its eyes, dark and pupil-less. The edges were now crusted and the one on the left was slightly damaged, clear fluid leaking out and matting the fur beneath.

It didn’t matter in the end, the eyes were removed and replaced with glass and it was stuffed and mounted on a plaque. My father put it on the place of honour, above the mantle with his other trophies.

He clapped me on the shoulder after he hung it.

“That’s my boy, your first big prey,”

I remember the weight of his hand on my shoulder, heavy, warm and comforting. I also remember my own hands, red from the buck’s blood as I washed them in the stream, the red snaking through the crystal clear water, dying it red with blood. I stared into the buck’s glass eyes, light brown with black centres and saw nothing.

“You can hunt like a man now.”

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By the time I finish cleaning and reassembling my gun, carefully taking it apart and checking each tiny mechanism, looking for damage or flaws, it is already time for lunch.

I heat up some leftover food that was in the fridge. It must have been takeout of some kind, too greasy and heavy to be anything else. I haven’t had takeout in a long time, delivery not being an option while on assignment. But the soggy noodles soaked in sauce, which leave an unpleasant sheen of grease on my hands and on my lips, are oddly satisfying and comforting. After I finish, I toss the container and drink a glass of water from the tap. I down it in one go before I open the fridge again.

No more food.

It will be another three days until they bring food again. However, I still have the emergency money they have left me, twenty-five grand in case anything goes wrong and I need a way to get out.

They won’t miss the few bucks that it would take to buy some milk and bread.

I change out of my sweaty tank and into something more inconspicuous before grabbing a pistol, a holster and my keys. I peel two paper bills off the roll before stashing the whole thing back under the floor boards, safely wrapped in three layers of plastic.

I lock the door carefully before making my way out, the hallway empty and dark. I don’t meet anyone in the elevator down and when I step out onto the street the change is almost disorientating. I have spent the last two weeks confined almost exclusively to the apartment with only my rifle as company. Now there are people all around me, where I had only ever observed them from above, distanced and detached.

The air is hot and humid, a weight in my lungs as I inhale and sticking to the skin of my hands and face, drawing moisture out. I am hot in my jacket but I don’t put my hood down. I dyed my hair black for this assignment as to not be too noticeable but nothing could disguise my face. So I keep my hood up and avoid the gaze of others, and they avoid mine.

I see the man before he sees me, as I stand in line at the checkout. He is in the same shirt that he had put on his morning, now sticking to the skin of his back in the heat; he has removed his jacket which is now folded over his forearm. Grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge, he stands in line behind me. I don’t move or turn around, but I’m careful not to tense up my shoulders or freeze. I continue like nothing has happened.

The man doesn’t say anything for a few moments before he speaks.

“Hot day isn’t it?”

I start. Despite watching him for the better part of two weeks I have never heard his voice. It is deep, but not excessively so. It wasn’t particular in any way, low and smooth with the accent of the region. It’s shocking. I turn half around, the hood still blocking most of my face before carefully replying.

“It is.” He doesn’t speak again as I pay for my stuff and leave.

When I get home I toss my bags onto the counter, not bothering to put them away, before rushing back to my perch. It is only moments after I settle down that the man’s door opens again and he walks in. He finishes his water and bins the empty bottle. He goes into his bedroom.

I watch him until he goes to sleep that night. When I go to stand I stumble, falling onto one knee. My legs have fallen asleep.

I make my way into the kitchen and start putting away the food. It is warm and the milk may have spoiled in the heat, but it doesn’t matter, I don’t feeling hungry anymore.

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The man had no father, and he lived with his maternal aunt’s family. His mother had been a flighty woman, too wild and free to be held down by something as inconsequential as a child and so she had left him, a squabbling three month old in the care of her older sister. His aunt had tried to have children for many years but had not been successful, so when he came she had welcomed him into the world like he was their biological child.

However much he loved his aunt he could never really feel completely in tune with her. She was too much like his mother. Too passionate and changeable, she often unsettled him. The one he got along with best though was his uncle. He was a steady man, quiet without being withdrawn. His uncle may not have been the first to offer you a hand when you fell or a comforting touch when you were sad, but you always knew where you stood with him. His uncle did not try to hide his pride or disappointment: not like his aunt and mother, who would rather ignore certain sentiments and just leave them behind. With his uncle he felt a peace, and between them stood a silence that was unburdened.

However, the peace that surrounded his uncle became mourning when his wife passed. She died young of an illness, only fifty and still brimming with so much light. He still expected to see her dancing through the house, the bright cloth of her dress fanning out around her as she twirled, or smell the scent of baking as the soft sound of her songs filled the afternoon. After that his uncle chased his dreams though the bottom of a bottle and soon after that his mourning became only silence.

After his uncle’s passing he got his first tattoo, a black ink of a bird, wings spread out. He had it over his heart and its wings fanned over his collar bone and circled his bicep. He wished he could have shown his uncle, if only to see the slight shake of his head and the faint smile that would have been on his lips. That silence conveying more than anyone could ever hope to.

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I watch the other man again today, moving through his silent and empty home, but today I know will be the end. I have already received the call, it is time.

So I line up my shot through the scope, I sight him just as he sits at his dining table, in the same blue shirt he wore the day I met him. I place my finger on the trigger and take a breath. I hesitate.

My hand shakes and my shot is lost. I line it up again but my fingers feel stiff. They are numb as I grip the trigger again.

I find my shot again. I don’t fire.

I do not want to shoot this man.

But somewhere I hear a voice.

*You see, first you need to make sure your grip is relaxed.*

The stiffness of my shoulders loosens.

*Yes just like that, now line it up.*

I have the man in my sight, the crosshairs trained on the back of his head.

*Now pull the trigger and be careful of the recoil.*

The bullet flies out the open window and crosses the distance between the two buildings in a second, effortlessly spanning the previously insurmountable distance. The man’s window shatters. The glass turns into a thousand pieces of falling crystal as the bullet smashes through it. The man falls forward, his head hitting the table.

His food is ruined and spilled, covered in glass and gore. Red seeps through the fabric of his shirt, staining it, blood pooling on the kitchen floor.

*That’s my boy, excellent shot.*

I move to stand up, getting ready to quickly pack up my gear and erase all trace of myself before leaving but my legs give out from under me. I hit the floor, hard. My left side is in pain and my ears are ringing. My head hurts and a sudden sense of vertigo causes my stomach to roil. I barely have time to turn my head before retching up the contents of my stomach onto the concrete floor next to me.

I have not eaten much but my nausea does not abate until I am only heaving up bile and spit.

I stay on the floor for a while, exhausted. It has been years since I have reacted so violently, not since my first kill. I rub my hands together, despite knowing there is no blood on them; it was all spilled across the man’s kitchen floor. I roll onto my back. My sight is blurry and I feel wetness on my cheeks when I blink, eyes overflowing.

*Tears*, I laugh at myself, *how weak*.

I get up and continue on.

From this distance I cannot see the man’s face, if there is anything left of it after a bullet had torn through his head, but I know that his eyes would be flat and cold. Deadened like chips of glass set into a mounted trophy.

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