

Not the Same

By ToadslyQuinne

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Some things are better left undead.

1. We Are the Dead

Hadrian stood at the edge of the woods and ground the butt of his penultimate cigarette into the carpet of pine needles and dead leaves. A cold autumn wind rattled the bare branches of the trees, making staccato sounds above his head. He was a monster hunter- specializing in zombies- and had been one for twenty-one years. He was thirty-six years old, now; still traveling the country and destroying the walking dead wherever he found them. He was tall, broad shouldered, and possessed a slight paunch. His face had been weathered by the sun and wind to the texture of soft leather. A weeks' worth of beard growth covered his square jaw and wound around his mouth to form a disjointed moustache. His hair was shoulder length, chestnut shot through with grey, and in need of cutting. Blue grey eyes sat on either side of a nose that had been broken more times than he could remember. He wore a short, dark grey trench coat over a black t-shirt and half-buttoned, stained blue flannel shirt. His jeans were faded and worn at the knees, but not yet ripped, and fit snugly over his brown leather, steel-toed boots. The forest seemed to bend away from the small, ramshackle dwelling that squatted inside the clearing. No lights were on in the cabin, despite the late hour and closing gloom. He approached the dwelling, and, several feet within the clearing, stepped on a cracked, moss-covered flag stone. The rest of the path to the house was marked by the barely perceptible presence of a stone walkway. The last dying rays of the sun had passed over the roof, but remained trapped in the nearby tree-tops to lend enough light for Hadrian's perusal. The cabin was made of wooden planks, nearly all of them warped and discoloured. The roof was missing most of it's shingles; the rest were greyed and coated in fungi. The stone chimney had caved in on itself. He walked the perimeter and discovered the front door was the only conventional way in. A long, murky window on the other side of the house was another possible entrance. Four small, warped steps led up to the sun-bleached porch. In the fading daylight, he could see that most of the awning had collapsed several feet to the right of the doorway but still allowed access inside. The entire porch was encased by a splintered railing, attached to eight square columns. Most of the beams were broken and hung away from the house. Using only the second step and despite it's squealing protest, he made his way onto the porch. The doorway was simply that; the door was hanging inside and by the bottom hinge, swaying slightly from an evening breeze and Hadrian's arrival. Squinting through the near-darkness inside the cabin, he could see that the window glass had been missing for a long time; in it's place were many dust-covered cobwebs. He stood outside the doorway for a moment, glancing left, right and up, and then stepped through the threshold. The first thing he noticed was the scent of decay and stale air. Now that's odd; even with one door, there's still plenty of room for fresh air to get in. His gaze took in the small living space. To the left- a cramped kitchen area furnished with a wood burning stove and ice box, an end table on the floor minus two legs, three chairs with no seats, and a balding bear-skin rug. To the right- a tattered sofa with one cushion, a cracked glass coffee table, and a large gun cabinet still housing four rifles. The last item in the room was one dead woman. She couldn't have been there for more than a few days- a week at the most. The smell in the close quarters of the dilapidated cabin was just starting to become unpleasant. Hadrian studied the corpse in the dim light of early evening. She was between twenty-five and thirty years old, five feet, four inches tall, and blonde. He crouched next to her and lifted one of her eyelids- her eyes were a bloodshot milky green. He'd never seen a blonde with green eyes. Releasing her eyelid, he picked up a few strands of her hair and rubbed them between his thumb and forefinger. The hair had a smooth, dry consistency, like the hair of a doll. Letting her

hair fall on her face, Hadrian stood and absently wiped his fingers on his jean-clad thigh. He continued his perusal of the body, carefully stepping over her outstretched limbs. She was wearing a sleeve-less sundress that ended a few inches above her grass stained knees. The dress was in a dull floral print with dirty lace trim around the hem and low-cut collar. Her left foot was sheathed in a battered denim sneaker; her right was bare. Her arms were covered in scratches and appeared to have been bitten in several places. She lay spread out on the floor, most likely thrown or left to fall there. Her head was facing the kitchen and stuck to the floor by the dried blood from her head wound. She had large eyes, a straight nose with a little bump on the end, and thin lips. Her long hair lay around her head in curled chunks- giving the appearance of a flat, feathered headdress. Hadrian started to roll her over, but the considerably large hole where the side of her head had been changed his mind. He set her back the way he'd found her and stepped back. This wasn't the first corpse he'd encountered, and most certainly wouldn't be the last. It was, however, the first corpse he'd found that appeared to be nothing more than merely a body. It was refreshing and unsettling at the same time. He was used to immediate confrontations and disliked having to wait for anything; be they food or monsters. Hadrian sighed and walked over to the window. His footsteps echoed throughout the tiny living space. He put his hand on the dusty window sill and ducked to look up at the sky; the old cabin hadn't been built for someone of Hadrian's large height and frame. It was almost night fall. Maybe then I'll know what happened here. The sill groaned as he leaned off of it; the floorboards creaked and whispered to each other as he walked across the house and out the door. Hadrian lowered himself to sit on the porch and patted the breast pocket of his coat for his last cigarette. Upon finding it, he dug in his jeans for a box of matches. He took another slow look around the clearing, keeping track of where he'd entered and where he would leave. He was about to strike a match when a sound from the cabin stilled his hand. A soft rustling noise came from inside, so quiet he thought he'd imagined it. He cocked his head and listened. After a few seconds, he heard another rustle of fabric and the sound of something wet being ripped. He slowly, quietly, put the matches and cigarette into a coat pocket and stood; his left hand resting on the revolver in his waistband. He stepped several feet away from the porch and waited. A loud, hard "crack-thump!" followed the slow parade of noises from inside the cabin. Hadrian could see the window from where he stood. He could also see a figure struggling to stand to the right of said window. He waited. The figure found it's footing and stumbled to the door. Hadrian curled his hand around the gun and continued to wait, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The figure made it's way clumsily out onto the porch. It started to fall, but managed to catch the worn and splintering banister in time. Hadrian pulled the gun out a few inches; his finger found the trigger. The figure stood on the porch, holding the railing and staring at him. Even in the fading twilight he knew it was watching him because it's eyes glowed a faint yellow. He drew the gun and cocked it, leveling it with the figures' forehead. "Evening, Ma'am," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. The dead woman's head tilted to the side. She lifted a hand off the railing and pushed her head back to it's original position. Hadrian was sure she would have greeted him if her jaw had been firmly attached; it was hanging at an angle from the left side of her face. He kept the gun trained on her and maintained eye contact with the woman as she made her way- hand over hand on the railing- to the stairs. She stood at the top of the steps, her right hand now gripping a column, and put her left foot on the top stair. Her joints made a wet, ripping noise as she lowered herself down each step. Finally, her right foot joined her left on the cracked stone flags of the walkway. Hadrian watched her around the barrel of his revolver. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me what happened to you in there, do you?," he queried. The woman shook her head slowly up and down and started awkwardly towards him. Hadrian smiled and brought his right hand up to signal she should stay where she was. She stopped five feet away from him and began nervously waving her hands. Her eyes were open

wide and where her jaw still met the rest of her face he could see she was scared. She wasn't much of a threat without a working jaw and with her joints snapping and popping like so much cereal, but zombies were always full of surprises. The dead woman continued waving her hands, then pointed to the house. Hadrian shook his head, not understanding. The woman made fumbling walking motions with her fingers. "Okay, you were walking," he supplied. She clapped her hands and pointed to the house again. "You were walking to the house," Hadrian said. She clapped again and looked relieved; her eyes focusing on the gun in his hand. Pointing to the house again, she made more walking motions with her other hand. "Yeah, you walked to the house, I got that," he said, losing patience. It wasn't her fault she wasn't making sense. He felt for her, though; something terrible must have happened to her in that house. Being re-animated some how and threatened by a stranger with a gun certainly wasn't making the situation better. He sighed and lowered the revolver a few inches, still not taking his finger off the trigger. "You know how to play charades?," he asked. She tried to smile, and then started to nod, but her head fell off. Hadrian wondered how it had managed to stay on so long. "I'm sorry, Ma'am," he whispered. Lowering his gun, he shot the woman through the top of her head. Shards of bone and bits of brain flew into the air; a few clumps of hair fluttered to the ground. Her body twitched and an awful howling, choking noise gurgled out of her throat. She took two lurching steps forward, then collapsed. Hadrian closed the distance between them and shot her twice in the spine; blood and spinal fluid spurting as each bullet entered. He watched the corpse for a few moments, then pulled a small canteen out of the back pocket of his jeans. Twisting open the cap with his mouth, he poured the contents over the body. While keeping his gun focused on the woman and holding the canteen, he reached into his jacket with his free hand and pulled out his matchbook. Screwing the lid back on the container and putting it in his pocket, he lit a match and let it fall on the gasoline soaked corpse. Her dress caught fire instantly and what little hair remained on her head followed suit. Hadrian kicked her crackling skull closer to her smouldering body and watched her burn. He put his gun back in the waistband of his jeans and retrieved his cigarette and matches. Lighting the last cigarette he was likely to have for a while, Hadrian put his hands in his coat pockets. The smoke from the corpse and that from his cigarette mingled several feet in the air. He kept his eyes on the body, noting every twitch and the slightest sound emanating from it. He shook his head and sighed through a smoke ring. Sorry ma'am; this just wasn't your day.