

The Collectors (925)

“Wasn’t it closer to the road this morning?” Natalie asked. She stared out at the ramshackle heap in the overgrown fields that surrounded the manor. Putting a hand on her shoulder, Tobin peered out the scummy window. The heap, about the size of a hay bale, was made of debris abandoned across the countryside. Corrugated tin roofs, plastic siding, chicken coops, and pallets were cobbled together into a mountain of refuse.

The heap had appeared in front of the manor a few nights ago. Its presence itched at the back of Tobin’s mind. Something about the heap spurred a fuzzy memory. But of what, he couldn’t place his finger on.

Tobin moved to their dying fire, stirring the flames back to crackling life with the poker. The books in the fireplace lit up, orange and gold, and then blackened into ash. “We should harvest the wood off it. Could keep us going for another couple of weeks.”

Natalie scanned the rain-soaked grounds. “Gives me the creeps, but I’ll do it if we have to.”

Tobin knew that Natalie would do almost anything to stay. Anything was better than facing the road south. Even slaughtering all of the livestock to get them through the winter. Even burying her entire family when they died of the Nodding Sickness. Even burning all of her father’s books for warmth when their axe broke.

“Oh, God. It’s moving. Definitely moving,” Natalie whispered.

Tobin swung around, poker still in hand. The heap crept, inch by inch, towards the manor, the upper layers juttering with the motion. As they watched, a rusted weathervane swayed with the motion and fell off into the trail of mud left behind.

“Collector urchins,” he said, the memory finally bubbling up to the surface. “Saw them on the coast when we were kids. They pick up debris with their spines and suckers. Seaweed, shell bits, or trash even. For camouflage.”

Natalie gripped the window sill with white knuckles. “Camouflage? From their predators or their prey?”

A cold finger of dread ran down Tobin’s spine. He shivered and stepped back towards the flames.

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That night, they slid the wooden desk in front of the library doors as always, but added a few bookcases tilted on their sides too. Tobin threw two more books onto the fire and they huddled together on the threadbare carpet. Natalie slipped into a restless sleep, interrupted by a dry, wheezing cough that had been plaguing her for weeks. With his arms and coat wrapped around Natalie, Tobin listened to the creak of the manor and counted supplies. A shelf of books, maybe enough to last them a week more if they only burned them at night. Three boxes of protein bars. An armful of sour apples. One spare set of batteries for the flashlight.

No refugees had passed by on the road in weeks. Natalie thought it was a hopeful sign. Whatever was ravaging the countryside in the North must've stopped. "People will start trickling back home soon", she said, "and we'll be glad we never left. Glad to still have a foundation to rebuild on."

Tobin wasn't so sure. Maybe there was no one left to flee.

Tobin woke with a jerk. Only embers glowed in the fireplace and his hands were numb from the cold. Natalie rolled to face him, her face pale and tight. He held her and heard it again, a skittering, shuffling noise from out in the hallway. Grabbing their flashlight, Tobin crept towards the library doors. He crawled around the bookshelves and under the desk to peer out from under the warped doors.

Inside the hallway, the heap swayed back and forth. Debris and mud trailed behind, as it sloughed off shingles and boards to fit through the narrower hallway. A collection of new pieces, curtain shreds, a rag doll, and broken porcelain dishes, were woven into the heap's structure now.

Tobin scrambled back to Natalie. She took one look at his stricken face and began packing their bags with the last of the food, matches, books, and blankets. With his pocket knife, Tobin tried prying open one of the windows, but the wood frame had swollen shut. Natalie came over and they tugged the window together until it opened with a crack. The library doors creaked and groaned as the heap pushed against them from the hallway. Natalie climbed out and jumped down one story into the wet grass.

Tobin had a leg over the threshold when the library doors burst open and the heap spilled into the room. It scuttled towards Tobin with surprising speed. Flashes of a black, writhing mass moved inside the jumble of trash. One long tendril squirmed its way out from under a birdhouse and wriggled on the floor, stretching towards him. He leapt out the window.

Natalie and Tobin ran through the long grass towards the road. The heap crashed against the window, shattering the panes. Natalie slowed to a jog, her breath coming out jagged and

wheezing, but didn't stop until they reached the road's broken asphalt. Tobin grabbed her arm and pulled her along, moving south. As the road left the fields and entered the pine forest, Tobin turned back to the manor. The heap swayed by the broken window on the second story.

He swung back around at Natalie's gasp. Underbrush on either side of the road began to stir. Before them sat a pile of pine limbs, leaves, and small animal bones. It shuddered and began lurching towards them.