

LAST RESORT

DIMENSIONAL BLOODSPORT



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Last Resort

Dimensional Bloodsport

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*To my mother and father, thank you for
supporting me so I can reach for my
dream*

Table of Contents

[Prologue: A Golden Age](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty One](#)

[Chapter Thirty Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty Five](#)

Prologue: A Golden Age

By the year 2347, the human race had firmly entered what many experts considered a golden age.

The world has shifted significantly since the dawn of the 20th Century, with many of humanity's worst problems solved with cooperation and science. Most experts agree that this shift towards a new golden age started with a small Swedish laboratory in 2066. It was there that a self-funded team of scientists managed to discover the secret to stable and safe fusion energy generation. Almost overnight the world's energy crisis was solved, with hundreds of reactors planned and constructed over the next thirty years.

Global warming, a catastrophe that was reported to be responsible for nearly two hundred thousand deaths and trillions of credits in damage, was the next crisis to be targeted. The world struggled for decades before eventually developing a solution, using a combination of weather-controlling technology and the nearly limitless energy provided by the hundreds and hundreds of fusion reactors that now dotted the globe.

By 2124 cancer, along with hundreds of other illnesses that used to threaten human lives, were a thing of the past. There were now dozens of different treatment methods, thousands of cures, and comprehensive vaccines to treat, prevent and cure almost every ailment known to man. Even the threat of genetic disorders faded from humanity's concern as treatments were developed to repair their symptoms. Many of these disorders were then completely eradicated when preventative therapies for people who were the carriers of these conditions prevented them from passing them on to their children.

Even old age, humanity's greatest enemy, suffered a grievous blow when pharmaceutical companies began selling age

treatment supplements. These drugs slowed the decay of telomeres during cell division, resulting in the life expectancy of humans to skyrocket to just under two hundred and fifty years in its first few iterations.

With the discovery of a realistically functioning ion thruster, travel between Earth and other planets in our solar system became a reality. By the year 2226, humanity's first underground Martian city, Prosperity, reached a population of fifty thousand. As interplanetary travel became a reality, humanity reached a point where material scarcity was no longer a concern. Many believed we could finally begin to transition into a post-scarcity society, especially with the advent of robotic helpers and VI factories.

Humanity continued to push the boundaries of science, even as many of our immediate problems were solved. Research turned to more exotic fields, and the study of more fantastic concepts became increasingly popular, funded by the wealth created by tapping into the infinite resources available to us through space travel.

In 2241 the graviton particle, the particle responsible for the concept of mass and gravity, was observed in a lab for the first time. Based on that discovery, the first antigravity technology was developed only fifteen years later. This allowed the creation of one of humanity's oldest dreams, the flying car. Soon exotic discoveries and their even more exotic effects were on the tip of everyone's tongues, in the minds of every researcher. Science became akin to a race, with researchers and businesses competing against each other to discover and create, feeding humanity's hunger for new and unique things.

Energy shields, biological regenerators, independent personal flight, technopathy, human enhancement through cybernetics and genetic manipulation, mind linking, and genetic body modification. All things that science provided humanity. The time of the rockstar scientist had come, as the scientific community enjoyed

an explosion of private funding to develop and cater to humanity's fantasies.

Decades passed, but the drive to push boundaries in fantastic ways endured. In the year 2327, privately funded scientists discovered a method to travel between dimensions and to versions of Earth that ran parallel with our own, though often at a different time scale. Originally an attempt to find a method of teleportation, the project was further funded in an attempt to find more efficient and cost-effective resource-gathering methods. Ultimately it was declared a failure when the limitation on how much energy it took to transport any significant amount of material between dimensions proved impossible to overcome.

Several years later, however, scientists funded by private entertainment companies refined the technique. While the trip was still exorbitantly expensive, costing almost a million credits for a single person, eventually, they began selling inter-reality trips to wealthy individuals looking to explore unknown worlds or go on grand adventures.

None of them, however, were ever at any risk. Each of these travelers arrived at their destinations armed and armored with the latest technology they could afford, often meaning the latest and greatest humanity had to offer. They underwent gene treatments to increase their strength, durability, stamina, and healing. They wore armor that could survive everything from the depths of space to weapons fire from some of humanity's deadliest weapons. One traveler even witnessed the detonation of a nuclear device and survived the blast unharmed for a full five seconds before the emergency return feature that all travelers carried pulled them home.

It was no surprise when an enterprising business attempted to record and market these trips as live-streamed adventures. Despite the initial spike in interest, however, viewership quickly fell. Beyond the excitement of new worlds to explore, there was no risk, no sense of challenge involved. There was still a small audience interested in the exploration aspect, but the company needed more

than that for the venture to be considered a success. The concept was written off as a failure, and alternate reality travel returned to being a fanciful vacation option for the high class.

Between the spike in scientific discovery and the implementation of those discoveries into real-world luxuries, it was easy to see why so many experts considered this to be humanity's golden age.

Of course, any expert not firmly in the grip of the nobles would know that was a load of shit.

While many of the old issues of the world were solved, many more developed in their place. Cancer may have been a thing of the past, but it was replaced by hundreds of different variations of exotic energy sickness. The early versions of antigrav tech caused horrible mutations in the people who were around them for long periods, causing thousands of repairmen and chauffeurs to suffer, and that was only one example among hundreds.

The first attempt to fix global warming was more of a patch than a fix and caused drought and famine to affect several countries. It also encouraged superstorms to develop in areas not under the control of the weather satellites, which just so happened to be in poorer parts of the world.

While science took leaps and bounds into the future at the cost of ethics, the gap between the rich and everyone else continued to grow. By 2175 around one-tenth of the population was incredibly rich, while the remaining population was locked somewhere around the lower middle class. People crossing from one class to the other became less and less frequent. Cities, sometimes called utopians or golden cities, began to develop. The prices and available residential space of these cities were strictly controlled to prevent anyone under a certain level of wealth or influence from moving in. These cities were largely automated and filled with cutting-edge technology and obscene luxuries.

In 2198 a cabal of the wealthiest people on the planet formed. Scared that a post-scarcity society would strip them of their power and influence, they began orchestrating markets, influencing politics, and controlling the media to cement the separation between the poor and the rich. What had once been an unintended side effect of greed was now being focused and directed to ensure that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor.

By 2250 this cabal of wealth gripped the world so tightly that they no longer bothered to hide. The rich became like royalty, taking the title of nobles once more. While they held no inherent political or legal power, their words were frequently taken as law.

By 2298 the world had grown used to the division and the forcible separation between the wealthy and the poor. Most of the population was focused on doing what they had to do to support themselves and their loved ones, occasionally affording luxuries that were out of date by decades, if not centuries. Even the ability to slow down aging was restricted, with pharmaceutical companies insisting that only a small portion of the population could safely consume the treatment.

The chance to move up, to cross between poor to wealthy, from one of the masses to a member of high society, became a fantasy, something someone would daydream about. The idea of self-made wealth or making it big through investments or even just gambling disappeared as the people in charge manipulated laws to prevent people from gaining wealth without their permission.

While typically, people are stuck at the level of wealth in which they are born, the fantasy occasionally does come true. Once in a blue moon, when it suits those in control, an opportunity presents itself. It may be a dream come true to some, but any reasonably intelligent person knows that such an offer does not come cheap and that while the reward may be honest, you are nothing but a number to the nobles.

Chapter One

The heavy garage door rattled as I pounded on it. It was just about ten in the morning, and I knew Steve would be up in the front of his store, meaning I would have to get his attention. Eventually, after another series of pounding, the small square buzzer next to the door lit up.

“Leon? That you? Hold on, I’ll be right there.”

I stepped back from the garage door, waiting patiently for Steve to finish whatever he was doing to come to the back and open the shuttered entrance. The pawn shop he ran wouldn’t be too busy at this time of day, so I wouldn’t have to wait long. I tugged and pushed my black polymer mask around, settling it down as I waited, wincing as the strap that kept it in place tugged at my short black hair. The air quality today was pretty bad between the heat and the still summer air, meaning the smog just hung around the city. It got so bad in some places that it made your eyes sting.

As I was waiting, I caught a look of myself in the corner mirrors for the garage door, the kind that let you see what was parked in your blind spots. The all-black mask covered the majority of my face and made me look intimidating, despite me being slightly shorter than average. My dark hazel eyes moved as I double-checked my jacket, pulling it straight.

After a minute or so, the heavy door shuddered, and the security fasteners on the bottom clunked open, allowing the entire door to roll up into the ceiling. Inside was an older man, about fifty years old, with a smooth-shaven head and a scar that ran along his face, narrowly missing his left eye. He was also wearing a plastic mask, though his model was minimalist, tightly covering his mouth and nose.

“Leon, you’re here a bit early,” He said, turning back into the storage area for his shop.

“My earlier delivery canceled on me,” I explained, following as Steve walked further in between the rows of stored merchandise.

Job cancellation was unfortunate but unavoidable in my line of work. Well, in my second line of work. When you ran a no-questions-asked courier service, someone would inevitably try and skip out or cancel with no warning. Luckily my reputation had grown enough at this point that people rarely wanted to screw me entirely out of my paycheck anymore.

“Well, be careful. Alex don’t really appreciate mixing up the schedule like that,” Steve warned, still facing away from me.

“I know, Steve, but I’ve been doing this delivery nearly three times a week for two months. I think I’ve earned a bit of flexibility.”

Steve was a well-known supplier of many things, able to get his hands on a whole host of items of questionable legality, and I had been running deliveries for him for around two years. At this point, he was my longest-running and most frequent client, with a half dozen weekly deliveries all over Outer York City. He was far from the only person I delivered for, but he was one of the few I could trust.

To a degree, at least.

Steve shrugged in response to my statement and kept walking, leading me through the storage area to the back left end of his shop, the area farthest from where his customers shopped. He started fiddling with a locker, placing his hand on the old bio scanner set in the door. A barely audible thump came from the armored locker as the bio scanner took a painless blood sample, its internal locking mechanism coming free with a louder series of clunks.

He pulled open the locker and stepped out of the way, revealing a mostly empty interior, with a singular small plastic box

about a foot long and half a foot tall and wide. It looked the same as almost every other package I had delivered for Steve to Alex and his gang.

I examined the package for a moment before pulling out my communicator chip, thumbing on the small metal square. The projected monochrome screen flickered once before stabilizing. Steve quickly pulled out his own chip, unclipping it from his belt. He fiddled with the screen for a bit before tapping the chip against mine. My screen changed, showing off a deposit of two hundred and fifty credits to my bank account.

“Alright, thank you, Steve,” I said, leaning forward to pick up the package. “I’ll call you when the package is delivered.”

The older man nodded, stepping out of the way as I leaned into the locker and lifted the package, shifting my hands around a bit to get a better grip. It wasn’t heavy by any means, only about eight pounds, but I knew that whatever this delivery was, I needed to be careful with it. I held the package carefully and walked out of the building with Steve right behind me. As I stepped outside, I could hear him hit the close switch on his garage door, the metal contraption jerking and starting to lower down behind me. I turned to watch the door close past the halfway point.

“Good luck!” Steve called out from under the closing door, the metal shutter slamming closed and the locking clamps latching it that way.

I shook my head and smirked, carrying the package around the shop, stopping just short of the corner where my cycle was parked. My cycle, a custom-built monocycle, was cobbled together from several different models, fitting together through sheer luck and strong metal bonder. It was anything but flashy, at least not on the surface, with a spot for me to sit on, the HUD and console in front, and a small, non-standard, very aftermarket storage unit on the back. The sleek single-person cycle was the heart and soul of my side business.

I popped open the storage unit and slid the package inside. It fit with enough extra room that I had to add a strap around it to keep it from rattling around. With a quick tug to ensure it was secure, I closed up the storage unit and reached under the seat, pulling out my helmet, still in its folded-up form. With practiced ease, I flicked it open and clipped it around my neck before activating it, the protective headgear extending up and around my head with a series of soft clicks. When it settled over my eyes, it took a second for the helmet to click on, the face panel lighting up and clearing, letting me easily see out of the face shield.

I climbed onto my cycle, putting my feet on the pedals and gripping the handles, my helmet screen showing an accelerometer and the power gauge. It was supposed to show things like directions, road warnings, and several other hazards, but the cobbled-together nature of my cycle and the second-hand nature of my helmet meant most of those options were broken.

“Let’s go,” I said simply, the voice command starting my cycle up, its motor whirring as I leaned forward.

I pulled around from the back of Steve’s pawn shop and out of the alley access. The old polycrrete structure was the cleanest building on the block, even though the whole street was populated with shops.

After checking both ways, I pulled out onto the street and took a right before accelerating away. Steve’s neighborhood was far from the worst Outer York City had to offer, but hanging around while carrying a package of probably questionable contents was always a bad idea. Still, I kept it legal speeds, knowing that getting picked up and reported by a traffic drone would be a big hassle.

After a while of driving, I merged onto the wider main streets, accelerating by leaning forward, my cycle easily keeping up with the cars and trucks already on it. I had an hour-long drive ahead of me, so I clicked on my music player to pass the time.

Eventually, I reached my destination, the warehouse district. Usually, this part of the city would be inaccessible to anyone in a vehicle. Just entering through one of the checkpoints was enough to get you blacklisted on several lists. Luckily, I had a bit of a secret for getting in and out of areas like this with my cycle.

The warehouse district was a combination of support communities and gang activity, with plenty of blending between the two. The support communities converted warehouses into massive living spaces, the communities forming around them and supporting each other by pooling resources. Gangs would then form around them in the name of protection. It wasn't uncommon for a support community to slowly convert into a new gang before being stomped flat by the OYCPD when they overextended and caused too much trouble.

The man I was currently on the way to see was the leader of one of those communities.

I kept my head on a swivel as I drove through the warehouse district, having to weave between old car wrecks, dumpsters, and plenty of other trash that partially blocked the city's abandoned roads. This whole thing made me nervous, but I couldn't turn down the credits. Money was too tight right now.

Eventually, I arrived at my destination, pulling into a parking lot that was surprisingly clear of wrecks and trash. Instead, all of the old, stripped-down cars were pushed around the edges of the parking lot as a barrier. As I pulled in, several people stood up and looked at me, hands reaching for a few suspiciously shaped bulges in their clothes.

I managed to hide my surprise well, mainly because my shocked look was hidden behind my helmet. The fact that they had access to guns was not what shocked me. Those were easy enough to get even though they were very illegal. What threw me for a loop was that they were more or less openly carrying them.

Traffic drones were one of the few police drones that came out to this part of the city regularly, and while my driving around was easily explainable, being parked in front of a known gang base was something else entirely. One of the guards recognized me and waved down the others. They still watched me warily as I drove around, leaving the parking lot and continuing into an alleyway. It was a bad habit for anyone to park out in the open like that, even if I knew none of these gangers would do anything to my ride.

I hopped off my cycle and collapsed my helmet, tucking it under my seat before cracking open my storage unit. I unclipped the package, tucked it under my arm, and made my way back around the warehouse, entering through a familiar door.

Stepping into the warehouse was like stepping into a different world, and not a peaceful one. Rust was the primary color inside, offset with blue since most of the shipping containers that Alex's gang stole sheet metal from were blue. A few dozen alcoves were set along the far wall, small rooms with beds and other small comforts filling each one. Along the other wall were communal living spaces with tables, chairs, and open fire pits. It was like a miniature village, all tucked up inside one massive warehouse.

I got a few waves as I walked deeper into the community, eventually stopping in front of the far wall, where Alex had claimed some sort of overseer's office as his own living space. I stood beside a crate as I looked up at the room, which sat on top of a solid structure with vents under it leading to who knows where. I didn't have to wait long for Alex to come out of his room and greet me. He leaned against the railing forward that ran along the walkway his room exited out onto.

The man was thin, reedy almost, with dark teeth and a surprisingly pale complexion that hinted he might not be working as hard as his subordinates. He also had some sort of old pistol on his hip, openly carried in a worn leather holster.

"Leon!" He said, all smiles. "You're a bit early."

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I apologize. “My first delivery for the day was canceled.”

“Ah, well, you’re lucky that I was free, otherwise, you would be stuck here waiting for a while,” The man said, gesturing to a man about ten feet to my left, who stepped closer without a word. “Now, my package?”

I nodded and passed the package to the man, who took it and ran it up to his boss, climbing the walkway ramp to get to him. Alex took the package and flicked out a simple plastisteel knife, slicing the box open.

I tried to be as neutral as possible on these deliveries, but I couldn’t help but frown. One of the core tenets of being a courier in a time when commercial delivery businesses regularly canceled service for entire areas was plausible deniability. My client cracking his package open in front of me was not something I was used to.

Seemingly unaware of my nervousness, the gang boss reached into the box and pulled out a compact rifle that I recognized as a cheap gun that was designed to be affordable, or at least they could until they were made illegal a decade or so ago. With a seemingly practiced flick, he extended the gun’s barrel and clicked open its stock and grip, the sleek black frame locking open. It looked old but serviceable.

“Ah... Steve comes through again!” Alex said, smiling as he showed off the firearm. “Thank you, Leon, for getting this to me so quickly. It’s been slow getting our hands on so many guns, but we can finally be safe with just a few more. Now, let’s get you your payment.”

He gestured to another subordinate, who nodded and rushed off. When he was out of sight, Alex focused on me again.

“You know Leon, we would readily welcome you to our community,” He said as if that was some sort of grand offer or

reward. “A runner like you would be invaluable, and you have earned a place here with your hard work.”

I bit back a curse. Alex had hinted at this idea before, skirting around the concept of me joining up, but he had never explicitly invited me. Typically I would just politely decline offers like these, but Alex thought his little fiefdom was some sort of communal paradise. He would take a flat no pretty severely.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said, trying my best to sound like I was genuinely flattered. “But I have too many obligations. I couldn’t leave them behind.”

“Ah, but outside obligations mean nothing. We would protect you from any debts you may have, and you would be part of our family.”

“I am sorry, but I have people depending on me,” I said, trying to stay calm.

Alex’s face went dark for a split second, the violent tendencies that ran under his facade shining through for a moment. Before he could offer again, probably with an added undertone of me not really having a choice, the man he had sent to fetch my pay returned. He reached out to pass me a stack of physical credits, a stack of bills that I would have to deposit on my own, as they were mostly useless like this.

Before I could accept them, a muffled thump reverberated from outside, catching everyone’s attention. As one, we all turned to one of the larger doors of the warehouse, the sound coming through again.

Suddenly the doors exploded, crumpled metal and broken glass raining down as a dozen cop bots stepped into the warehouse, guns raised and aimed at us.

“This is the OYCPD! Surrender now!”

I could hear the sounds of a dozen gangers pulling their weapons. I had just enough time to dive behind the crate next to me before both sides opened fire.

Chapter Two

It wasn't exactly a difficult conclusion to reach at this point, but I should have passed on this job. I leaned against the crate as zap rounds flew over my head and slammed into my cover, sending up dust and shards of plastic. I frantically looked around and saw the man holding my money, twitching and seizing on the ground from a zap round, the brick of credits on the floor. I reached out to grab them, only for them to explode and scatter when a bullet slammed into them.

I could hear the artificial voices of nearly a dozen police bots demanding that everyone surrender. At this point, there was no way they would believe that I wasn't a community member, not when everyone else responded to their request with another barrage of bullets.

I really should have seen this coming. Communities turning bad was as nearly a constant part of life as taxes, and Alex and his gang showed all signs of going bad. Apparently, my deliveries had been part of the problem.

Guess I should have expected it to go to shit sooner rather than later.

A bullet hit the top of my cover and ricocheted up, sparking against the metal walkway and taking out one of the gangsters' feet, knocking him down. He screamed out, doing his best to stem the bleeding with one hand while firing back at the cop bots with the other.

I ducked lower and focused, doing my best to ignore the rising panic and adrenaline. If working this job had taught me anything, it was that adrenaline could be useful, but adrenaline-fueled choices were how you ended up dead.

I looked around, ignoring the cracking whip of passing bullets and the sizzling sound of zap rounds hitting surfaces solid enough to activate their “non-lethal” bursts of electricity. As I scanned the walkway in front of me, I spotted a rusty grate leading to some sort of vent or crawlspace.

I took a deep breath and waited for some sort of lull in the fighting before shaking my head and crawling forward, doing my best to ignore the shrapnel and sparks as bullets pinged off the polycrystalline floor and plastisteel walkway. When I reached the rusted grate, I spun around, laid on my back, and lashed out at the metal with my boot. It held for the first kick, but I could see the metal screws holding it up give and pop free with the second.

I spun back around to my hands and knees and crawled into the space, finally letting my adrenaline fuel me as I pushed through cobwebs and dust, thankful that my full face mask would filter all of it out.

If the warehouse had been any newer, I was pretty sure this crawl space would be almost pitch black. Instead, the nearly hundred and fifty year old building was full of rust and holes, meaning just enough light bled in for me to see. I turned a corner and kept crawling, pausing at an intersection to quickly work through what direction I was facing. The sounds of shouting, screaming, and guns being shot still reached me, though it was distorted by the reverberations of the metal surfaces around me.

I turned left, hoping I picked the right direction before finally coming to another grate, this one with some sort of environmental barrier on the other side. It was more rusted out than the first grate and popped free after a few shoves.

I peeked out of the vent and looked around, once again cursing that I had taken this job, despite all the signs saying it was a bad idea to keep delivering to this community. I took a deep breath and focused, knowing I needed to concentrate and not dwell on what I should have done.

I had been running deliveries on the side for almost seven years, and this wasn't exactly the first time things had gone sideways. Sometimes the money was just too good to say no, and we needed every credit we could get our hands on. Courier work was decent paying work, and with courier and delivery companies pulled out of dangerous lowie neighborhoods, I was in relatively high demand, especially after I proved I could be trusted.

What started as a way to earn a quick credit or ten on the weekends with my cycle had become a substantial part of my family's income, especially after my father died.

After another quick look around, I climbed out of the vent and dropped to the ground, managing to not roll my ankle or break my wrist as I landed awkwardly. A quick look at my mental map, and I turned down the alley I had escaped into, running away from the sirens and towards my ticket out of there.

I knew I was a relatively well-known staple of the area, but the cops also knew I was neutral. I had a few friends on the force for this district who would vouch for me. With any luck, if I didn't get spotted by someone with a camera, they would ignore the scans that showed my ride was here. All I needed to do was avoid getting close to-

A thump sounded behind me, and I had just enough time to look and immediately dive behind a dumpster before a police bot turned to look down the alleyway. It was armored in beat-up blue metal, about six feet tall, with a gun in one mechanical hand and a glowing baton in the other. I bit back a curse as I could hear its metal feet clanking against the trash-covered alleyway. Eventually, the robot was close enough that I could hear its micromotors and servos moving as it shifted.

If it spotted me, my only chance would be to destroy it as quickly as possible. With how old the cop bots were in this area, there was a slight chance that I could ruin its transmitter before it notified the entire district that it had found someone. I might have

been wearing a mask that covered most of my face, but that wouldn't mean much if they got a close-up of me.

The bot cast a shadow around the corner of the dumpster, forcing me to pull my feet closer to keep from being seen. I gripped the handle of my knife, hoping that the induction blade would be enough to cut through the armor around its head.

Just before I was about to jump out, its radio buzzed with a burst of what sounded like static. Clearly, it understood something I didn't because it turned around and bolted in the other direction, its feet making heavy clunking noises as it ran.

I half collapsed against the dumpster, my heart thundering in my chest. I would have attacked the bot if I had no choice, but that didn't mean I didn't know my chances of taking it down would have been just about zero.

When my heart finally recovered, I stood from my spot and ran further down the alleyway, making the first left down another. Eventually I skidded to a stop by my cycle.

After taking a short thirty-second break to calm down and recover from my run, I reached under the storage unit and flicked a switch, a low hum emanating from the bike. I then reached down, grabbed the ordinarily close to two-hundred-pound cycle, and threw it over my shoulder as if it was a hefty backpack.

The hum, made by the mass reducers scavenged from a one-in-a-million find at a junkyard, reduced the weight of the cycle to a measly thirty pounds, letting me run on foot, sneak through smaller areas, and, most importantly, travel silently and without giving off any energy or heat that would be picked up on any scans the cops would be doing. After all, what would a lowie like me be doing with mass reducers? And what would a noble be doing here in this area? This ability to pick up my cycle and carry it around allowed me to get around several restrictions in place for traveling between the more or less lawless and abandoned warehouse district of Outer York City

and the more populated sections. Vehicles were generally stopped and turned back if they got close to that part of the city, making it difficult for couriers to deliver there.

I carried my cycle for a while, stopping every five minutes to let the fusion battery that ran the mass reducers cool off. That was another piece of tech I really shouldn't have, though this one was even less likely to be noticed as fusion generators didn't give off any exotic readings. The most I would get for the generator was a slap on the wrist, while the mass reducers would get my license revoked at minimum for reckless use of dangerous technology or some bullshit like that.

When I was finally done sneaking through small alleyways and broken-down warehouses, I took cover in an abandoned office building, taking advantage of its front door being smashed down. I found a small room, leaned my cycle against the wall, and sat on the ground beside it, hunkering down to wait a few hours until the heat around the warehouse district had settled.

Eventually, after three hours spent listening closely to passing people and keeping an eye out for any drones, I got ready to leave. After a quick search of my cycle's storage, I pulled off my black mask and held my breath, quickly replacing it with a new red one. A few breaths wouldn't be that bad, but they tended to add up over time.

With the straps secured, I turned the mask on, the cloth and plastic pulsing a vibration once before settling down. I took a small breath to ensure it was working before taking a deeper one. I quickly stripped off my shirt and grabbed a spare, folded and sealed inside a palm-sized package in the bottom of the cycle's storage. I did the same to my pants, switching them out for a spare pair. Finally, I put my thick riding jacket over it, zipping it up completely. Now, if I had gotten unlucky and someone had managed to get some footage of me as the raid on the warehouse started, I would look as different as possible.

I made my way back out of the building and onto the street, carrying my cycle on my back again. I quickly set my cycle on standby, the single-wheeled vehicle stabilizing itself as I put it down. I quickly grabbed my helmet and hooked it around my neck, already climbing onto the cycle as it unfolded and covered my head.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” I said, and the one-wheeled cycle whirred to life, responding to my voice command.

With a tight smile, I angled my feet against the pedals, leaning forward and pulling out into the street. The sun was already sinking down over the horizon as I drove down the mostly empty road, having spent almost half the day on an errand that was supposed to take an hour at most.

At least I had already gotten the first third of my payment.

The ride home took a bit longer than it usually would as I took a roundabout route, driving through the Outer York City limits to make sure I wasn’t being followed. Eventually, I pulled into the parking lot for the massive apartment complex my family and I lived in. It was a standard megacomplex, sixty floors tall with two hundred rooms per floor. The creators of the megacomplex had attempted to build everything you might need into the structure, but these days you were lucky if half of the amenities worked.

I swiped my chip across the control panel, which charged me two credits to lock my bike up in the vehicle storage lot. I tapped in my code, the single-wheel vehicle sinking down into the ground on a platform to be stored in my parking allocation. The platform rattled and shook a bit as it moved, showing its age and poor maintenance.

With my cycle stored away, I unzipped my jacket as I made my way into the apartment complex, ignoring the hawkers and buskers that populated the bottom floor of the massive building. I waved off a rather persistent woman, trying to sell me vegetables from her own balcony garden, and stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the 57th floor. The long-since broken

speakers spit out random spurts of soft elevator music as the doors closed.

Not long after that, I stepped into the apartment. It still smells vaguely of dinner, which after a quick check in the fridge, turned out to be meatballs and spaghetti. I grabbed a small container Mom set aside for me and sat at the table to eat. Before I could even start eating the floorboards from the hallway creaked.

“You wash your hands before you eat, young man. There is no way they are clean after you have been out all day,” My mom said, stepping into the kitchen in an old shirt and sweatpants, her hair pulled up into a bun. “And take your jacket off.”

I chuckled and nodded, stepping up from the table and stripping off my jacket before kicking off my shoes and returning to the kitchen to wash my hands.

“How was work?” I asked as I scrubbed my hands under the sink, drying them off with a pass through the beat-up dryer machine on the counter.

“Fine, Mr. Sheffield was in a good mood for once,” She said, sitting down next to my spot at the table. “Why did it take so long for you to get back?”

One of mom’s bosses habitually took his bad days out on the people he knew couldn’t afford to lose their job. I let out a sigh, leaning on the counter for a moment before turning back around and sitting down. Mom had gotten me a beer from the fridge when I wasn’t looking.

“There was a raid in the warehouse that I was delivering to, but everything was fine,” I explained reluctantly, wanting to be honest but still downplaying. “I had to let the heat die down before leaving. It was fine though, nothing dangerous, just some quiet arrests of some gangers.”

“Oh really? So it wasn’t a shoot-out? Not something the news would pick up on and broadcast?” She asked, raising an eyebrow. “Honey, what if-”

“Mom, I couldn’t say no to a job like that,” I explained, cutting her off. “They were paying above premium for safe and quick delivery. We need the money too much for me to say no to that. Getting caught up in a raid like that is unlucky, but... We need the money.”

For a while, we were silent, Mom letting me eat my dinner in peace. I know she hated me taking risks for my courier jobs for exactly this reason. But she also knew I was right.

We did need the money.

“How’s Olivia?” I asked, taking a sip from my beer.

“Mrs. Lee said she had a good day,” Mom responded, looking down the hall to the room she shared with my youngest sister. “Only had a few coughing fits and none with blood.”

I nodded and took the last bite of my dinner, taking my dishes to the sink and rinsing them off before putting them in the sonic scrubber.

“Go get some rest, Mom. You have work early tomorrow,” I said as I was done, my mother standing up from her chair and tucking it back under the table.

“So do you,” She countered, shaking her head.

I crossed our small kitchen to give her a hug, holding her tight for a moment, releasing her only for her to hold on tighter.

“Thank you, Leon. Thank you for working so hard,” She said, her head on my shoulder.

After another long moment, she let me go, returning to her bedroom without another word. I could tell she was crying even if I

couldn't see her face.

Chapter Three

The following day I woke up as Tyler, my little brother, was getting ready for school. He was only eleven years old, and try as he might, there was no way he would ever be quiet enough to not wake me up while he got ready. That was honestly fine because I would have to wake up soon after him anyway. I helped him get some breakfast, had a cheap meal bar, and quickly got ready for work. Mom had already left for her first job, meaning I was responsible for making sure Tyler got out the door.

“Where were you last night?” He asked as I poured him a bowl of cereal. “Mom made spaghetti and meatballs!”

“I saw. It was good!” I said with a smile. “I’m sorry I missed eating dinner with you guys, but work was busy.”

“It’s okay. Will you be home tonight?”

Dinner had always been important to my family, something Mom and I tried to keep going after my father died. It didn’t always work out, but we both tried to be home for dinner, even if we had to move it earlier or later for work.

When Tyler finished eating, I helped him get ready, packing a lunch in his bag before handing him off to the family across the hall. They had a kid Tyler’s age, and they would take him down to the fortieth floor, where the apartment complex held its virtual interactive classes. It wasn’t the best education, but it was free.

With Tyler off to school, it was time to get Olivia up. I knocked on the door, mostly out of habit, as there was no way she had gotten out of bed herself. Opening the door, I made my way to her bed, walking around Mom’s to get to it.

“Olivia, it’s time to get up,” I said, shaking her gently, making sure not to disturb her breathing apparatus.

Olivia was thirteen, but she was considerably smaller than my brother. Pale, skinny, and weak, with black hair like my own, and green eyes like my mom, she was struggling through the same thing that had killed my father.

Around four years ago, my father left to pick her up from a friend's house. On the way back, they were driving on the highway when a noble lost control of his hoverbike and crashed into a nearby transport truck. The noble survived unscathed thanks to some bullshit tech built into his bike, but the transport truck was carrying hazardous material, and the same tech that kept the noble safe broke the truck's containment.

The storage ruptured violently and spread its contents in a fine mist over fifty meters in all directions. I couldn't tell you what its technical name was, but the doctor claimed it was an artificial purple crystal and that it was used in making batteries the size of pinheads that held a large amount of energy. All I know is that my dad was one of the seventy-eight people who died in minutes from breathing it in, and my sister was one of ten that survived, though she was one of three who were still alive. It destroyed her lungs and burned her insides, hurting her heart and liver.

I gave her another shake, and eventually, she opened her eyes and weakly reached out, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze.

"...Morning," She wheezed, slowly struggling to sit up.

"Morning, how do you feel?"

"Good," She said, breathing a bit harder from the effort of talking and moving. "Slept well."

"That's good to hear. Now let's get you into the shower and ready for the day."

I spent an hour helping Olivia shower, change and eat, as well as take her medications. Whatever that purple crystal had been, it required daily regenerator pills to keep it from tearing her lungs to shreds and a half dozen drugs to keep the poison it filled her blood with from killing her. These drugs cost a significant portion of what my mother and I made, but all they were doing was stopping the symptoms. We weren't allowed to even get close to any clinic capable of fixing her, never mind actually going inside. Instead, we were doomed to barely patch her up as she slowly withered away.

Just about when she was set and sat in her favorite chair, tucked into the corner of the small space we called a living room, the door buzzer went off. I quickly went to answer it, finding Mrs. Lee at the door. She stepped in with a smile, a small bag of knitting goods hanging from her shoulder.

"Hello, Leon, good to see you, dear," She said with a kind smile. "How are you?"

"I'm doing well, Mrs. Lee. How are you?"

Mrs. Lee, an aging grandmother who lived down the hall, had volunteered long ago to watch over Olivia while Mom and I were at work. She was a godsend and insisted that she didn't need any payment beyond making sure we had a decent teapot in the cabinet. Mom and I had no idea what we would do when she got too old to move around, something that was quickly approaching.

"I'm doing well enough, dear. My old bones are sore, but they still work fine!" She said as she made her way into the living room. "Good morning Olivia."

"Morning," Olivia responded with a slight cough, managing to give the elderly woman a small wave as well, saying something quietly that I couldn't quite make out, but Mrs. Lee heard.

"That's good, dear," She said with a kindly smile, putting down her bag of yarn before turning to me. "You best get going. Unless I'm mistaken, you're already late for work."

A quick check of my chip and I couldn't help but curse.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lee. Sorry, Olivia, I need to get going. I'll see you tonight, alright?" I said, giving my younger sister a kiss on her forehead before rushing out of the room.

I got ready quickly, pulling on my boots and uniform before covering it all in my jacket and calling out a final goodbye before stepping out of the apartment. I rushed down to the parking lot, punched in my code, and waited for the rickety and rusty vehicle lift at the parking storage lot. It took a minute or so, but eventually, it lifted out my cycle. I quickly grabbed my helmet and hopped on, riding out of the parking lot before my helmet could even deploy.

It was a short drive to the mechanic's shop where I worked. Luckily, there was hardly any traffic because of how early it was and because I was traveling out of the city rather than into it. I pulled into the parking lot and slid up into a small corner spot, pulling off my helmet and tucking it away before half-jogging to the back door. I was immediately greeted by the sounds of power tools and loud talking.

I quickly hung up my jacket and pulled on my coveralls, stepping out into the main working area of the decent-sized garage.

"Leon! Nice of you to join us." The voice of my boss, Reese, called out.

"Sorry, had to take care of my sister for a bit," I explained, turning to see my boss, who had been previously hidden by a truck.

"Right, well, I guess it happens. Do me a favor and check over Lenny's work and close up that skimmer." He said, wincing when I mentioned my sister.

I nodded, letting out a long breath. Reese was a mixed bag when it came to how strict and demanding he was. Sometimes he was understanding, and others, he could be a stone-cold bastard.

You could sometimes tell by his mood, but other times it seemed random.

I quickly walked to the skimmer he had been talking about, sitting on a lifter, its bottom hatch open. Skimmer tech was the predecessor to full-on hover or antigrav tech and was the closest to it that a lowie would ever legally get their hands on. This skimmer was an old version of an already outdated car, beaten up and covered in bumps and scratches. Still, they had been made to last, and its repulsor drive was still fully intact and in good condition. I quickly scanned and looked through the drive, using my chips flashlight to look for anything wrong.

Lenny was a pretty good mechanic but had the tendency to let things slip his mind. Reeves blamed drug use when he was younger before the nobles started spreading all of their “harmless” drugs. Lenny, of course, insisted he never did anything beyond smoking a few peco-cigs when he was much younger.

Luckily he seemed to have done a pretty good job finishing this up, meaning it was up to me to seal the vehicle closed, and to clean up any messes. When I was just about done, someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned to find my boss behind me.

Reese looked nervous, his eyes darting around and sweat dripping from his brow. For a moment, I panicked, thinking maybe the cops had tracked me down after all, before I remembered that Reese would sooner go down swinging than sell anyone out to the cops.

“What’s wrong, Reese?” I asked, looking over his shoulder to see if anyone else was there.

“T-t-there’s a customer here,” He explained, wringing his hands. “They are looking to get their car washed.”

“What?” I asked, shaking my head in confusion as I looked back to the car. “There’s a carwash down the road. Tell them to go

there.”

“Leon... It’s a noble,” He explained, shaking his head. “He specifically asked for you. By name.”

I stopped and turned back to Reese, my eyes going wide as I waited for the punchline, only for Reese to stay silent. He just looked scared.

All lowies reacted differently to nobles, and it was often hard to tell in what way someone would until you saw it. Some got angry and jealous, though only idiots actually did anything about that anger. Others did their best to get on their good side, schmoozing and ass-kissing, hoping they would get whatever crumbs and leftovers the nobles brushed off their plate. Others, apparently like Reese, were terrified of them.

“Fuck... I have no idea what that means,” I admitted, honestly baffled. “Why would a noble want anything to do with me?”

“I don’t fucking know,” He responded. “But I want you to wash your hands, put on some clean overalls, and get the fuck out there.”

I nodded, quickly gathering some car cleaning supplies and changing into a clean outfit. While I didn’t fall into the same category as Reese, I wasn’t stupid. You never really knew what a noble was going to do, and that went double when they were upset.

Once I had neatened up and gotten everything together, including a sonic scrubber and a vacuum, I stepped out into the front polycrte parking area for the garage. According to Reese, it had once been a large fuel station, which he bought and converted into space to park and keep customers’ cars.

Off to the side of the sizable polycrte platform was a beautiful hover car. It was sitting on deployed landing legs, the sleek, angular lines of this particular model highlighted with long strands of slowly pulsing lights. The paneling was completely white, while the

windshield was opaque deep blue. Between the bright light coloring and the direct sunlight, it was easy to tell that there wasn't a spot on it.

Next to the vehicle, sitting in some sort of comfortable-looking framework chair, was the noble Reese had mentioned. It wasn't hard to tell he was a noble, though he lacked any of the crazy additions and modifications that many of them had. His clothes were clean and sharp, his hair perfectly styled. He smiled when he saw me, his teeth the perfect level of whiteness. The only visible augmentation I could see was a singular straight black line that ran along his lower jaw and angled up to connect to his ear. The line ended along his jaw with a small circle, which was currently glowing green.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go. The lowie I was talking about is here... Yes, I'll talk to you later... ciao!"

The glowing circle went dark as he seemed to have hung up on whoever he had been talking to. He focused on me with a rather stunning smile, though it only made me feel more on edge.

"Leon Draver! Thank you for indulging in me. I know it's a bit ridiculous to come out here and ask to get my car cleaned, but I made a bit of a mess inside on the passenger seat."

"I... It's fine," I said, debating internally before finally asking what I wanted to know. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"Nope!" He said with another smile, this one cut with an edge of enjoyment.

When I realized he wasn't going to explain his annoyingly vague response, I picked up the vacuum cleaner and walked around to the opposite side, cracking the door open slowly. The door opened with a hiss of a seal breaking, sliding up and on top of the car silently.

The interior was even more spotless than the outside, with perfectly maintained carpets, seats, and everything else... Save for the passenger seat and floor, which looked like he had literally just upended a fast food box onto the seat. A quick test showed that the food was still warm.

I took a long breath, calming myself down before I started cleaning up the food, dropping it into a trash bag. I was halfway through the fries when he spoke again.

“You know, it is polite to ask someone their name,” He said from right behind me, making me whirl around in response.

Somehow he had moved his seat directly behind me, startling me into bashing my head on the edge of his door.

“Sorry, what’s your name sir?” I asked, biting back a curse and rubbing the back of my head.

“Ilbryen Middison, at your service.” He said, giving me a wink.

The name was strange but that was standard fare for eccentric nobles. It was a common theory they made them up when talking to lowies to mess with us.

“Nice to meet you,” I responded, though by now, I was holding back my annoyance.

A few more minutes passed, and I finished cleaning up the big chunks of food, meaning it was time to vacuum up the crumbs and smaller pieces. Luckily while the loud, powerful vacuum was going, there was no way they could ask any questions. I got almost all of the crumbs sucked out of the seat and floor, trying my best to walk the line of getting this over with and making sure that I actually did a good job. It was humiliating, especially since I was sure he made this mess on purpose.

When everything was vacuumed, I pulled out the handheld sonic scrubber and started working on the condiment and grease stains. I soaked each spot with a cleaning solution before breaking the stain down with the sonic scrubber and wiping it all up.

“So... I have a question, Leon,” Ilbryen said, still watching me as I worked. “Why work this job and do your deliveries? Wouldn't it make much more sense to work as a full-time courier? You make more money doing that, don't you?”

I froze, halfway inside the hovercraft, before slowly pulling out and turning to face him. The worry that had been sitting in the pit of my stomach ever since Reese had said he was asking for my name expanded, and my heartbeat picked up.

“How did you know that?” I asked, resisting the urge to lean on the doorframe of his craft. “I don't exactly advertise that to everyone.”

“Oh please, you expect a noble not to have access to that kind of information?” He said, rolling his eyes. “What you should really be worried about is why I decided to bribe the police to lose the footage of you running away from the warehouse raid last night.”

Chapter Four

I stared at the smug, smirking noble, my fist gripping the sonic scrubber tightly. What had been an already concerning situation was quickly going downhill, and I had to fight the urge to do anything stupid. It was very likely that this man could kill me with his bare hands, brag about it openly, and still suffer no consequences. It took several deep breaths before I felt like I was ready to speak.

“Why would you bribe the police to keep them off my back?” I asked with deliberate slowness.

Instead of answering, the noble simply reached behind his chair, pulling some sort of cube out and dropping it next to him. After a moment, a chair just like his unfolded in a way that made me want to rub my eyes and look again.

“Take a seat,” He instructed with a broad gesture. “It’s a bit of a tale to tell, and I wouldn’t want to rush.”

After a long moment, I walked closer and sat gently in the seat. It was one of the most comfortable things I had ever sat in, supporting me perfectly while still offering the best cushioning I had ever felt. It took me a minute to remember what kind of situation I was in, only to find Ilbryen chuckling at my enjoyment.

“It’s nice, right? Five thousand credits well spent, I would say.”

I froze, my eyes widening, as I realized I was sitting in a chair worth about as much as I made in a month, and only if I was lucky. The noble bastard only laughed harder, shaking his head as if it was the funniest thing in the world. When he eventually calmed down, he let out a long sigh and looked at me, folding his hands in his lap.

“Where were we? Right! I was about to tell you a story!” He said with an excited smile on his face. “This story starts before you were born at a research company called Trend-Tech. Their primary

purpose was to discover a method of teleportation, something a great many companies are still trying to figure out.”

As he talked, he raised his hand, a hologram projecting from his palm showing off a simple logo for Trend-Tech. It looked familiar, but I really couldn't place it.

“While they never did exactly crack that mystery, they did stumble upon a relatively interesting discovery,” Ilbryen continued. “They discovered that running alongside our reality were other realities. Some of them were like ours, some of them very different. You might have heard about such a thing in school.”

I nodded, finally placing the company logo. Their discovery was mentioned briefly during my VI classes. I remembered a lecture about how the technology could hold the key to filling in the gaps of many historical mysteries. Unsurprisingly that went exactly nowhere.

“A project was created around the discovery, with the final goal being to find a way to colonize empty earth and harvest their materials, thereby cutting the need for expensive fleets of asteroid miners and transporters.”

As he talked, the projection hovering above his hand shifted, showing a massive raised platform with two huge arches over it, crossing each other in an “X” shape. The incredibly high-quality projection showed every detail as a large box was carried onto the platform. When everyone was clear of the platform, the arches glowed with red energy that swirled around the box before finally blasting out. When the screen cleared, the box was gone.

“Unfortunately, as the mass of the target being sent increases, the energy required to send that target exponentially increases. To put it in perspective, just fifteen tons of material would require an amount of energy equivalent to the sun's entire output for a single millisecond, not something we are quite capable of creating. Further, for the trip to be safe for humans, they must be stored in a

specialized container that costs an exorbitant amount of money and only lasts a few jumps.”

His projection shifted again, showing the same raised platform, arches, and container in the center. As the hologram played, a man climbed into the container, and two scientists closed it behind him. The same process as before repeated, and when the flash of red energy dissipated, the container was gone.

The hologram seemed to fast forward, scientists rushing around for a while before it slowed back down to normal speed. The same energy swirled around the platform, only this time, instead of exploding outward, it imploded inward, revealing the same container as before, though it was smoking and scarred with black lines. Scientists in hazard suits rushed in and freed the man, who seemed okay but was rushed off on a stretcher to be examined.

“Needless to say, with such a high cost and unavoidable restriction, the idea of using this as a way to gather materials failed almost immediately,” The artificially enhanced noble said. “The technology, however, was almost immediately converted into a tool for entertainment, with people paying exorbitant prices to travel and experience new and weird Earths. Imagine the adventure!”

The projected hologram now showed a heavily armored individual running and leaping over what appeared to be burnt-out houses and firing lasers at... zombies?

“You’ve got to be shitting me...” I said, my eyes wide, my words sneaking out through my shock. “There is no way that’s real.”

“It is, in fact! What wonderful adventures are available through those arches!” Ilbryen said with a smile. “This particular world fell prey to a bioengineered virus that rotted the brains of all humans on the planet and turned them into mindless, hungry rage monsters.”

I watched as the footage continued, showing the noble as they smashed through a building and swiftly dispatched zombies, blasting them with powerful laser weapons and their bare hands.

“Of course, someone had the rather brilliant idea to start a live stream of some of the more interesting explorers,” He explained, the footage shifting until it looked like some sort of live-streamed event. “It succeeded for a while, but viewers quickly got bored. While watching someone tear through a horde of rage monsters might be fun the first time, it eventually gets boring when everyone realizes that the nobles were never in any actual danger. No noble in their right mind would give up their enhancements in normal situations, never mind these adventures that could *actually* be dangerous!”

The footage changed, showing the same armored noble sitting down eating a sandwich, their now empty armor rampaging around them, several drones floating above them and firing down at the mindless hoard around them, all while the zombies were held at bay by a massive glowing dome.

“With no risk, no tension, only a small audience of people found the broadcasts entertaining,” He explained, closing his fist, the hologram flickering and disappearing. “This leads us to our current situation. The company I represent is certain that the live broadcasting of dimensional travelers *is* the next big thing in entertainment. We just need to change the circumstances.”

The pit in my stomach felt like it dropped to my feet, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

“Ah, I see you have figured out where I am going with this! Very well, I will cut to the chase. We believe that with the proper motivation and the proper level of danger, we could create the next big thing. Imagine a live broadcast adventure of a lowie, struggling against the great dangers of an unknown world. Think of the excitement, the drama, the prestige!” He explained excitedly. “Think of the brand deals, the merchandise, the advertisement revenue!”

It took almost a full minute for Ilbryen to finally come down from his fantasy. He coughed, shook his head, and looked at me, looking slightly sheepish.

“My apologies. Where was I?” He said, rubbing his face for a moment before perking up. “Right! My company wishes to offer you the chance of a lifetime. We will raise you and your family up to the noble class. Pay out a massive sum of money, provide a new place of residence, and the very best of education and luxury. Your brother would get the best education available, no more settling for free V.I. classes. Your mom could quit her jobs, enjoy her hobbies, or maybe even get her own education... But perhaps even more importantly, your youngest sister would have access to the same level of health care that I do. Lung replacements, muscle revivers, bone stabilizers, everything she could possibly need to recover from her ordeal. Just imagine, by this time next week, your dear Olivia could be walking around in a noble park, enjoying the flowers.”

The noble businessman was silent for a moment, letting his offer sink in. Despite myself, I couldn't help but imagine all of it as he spoke.

“All you would need to do is spend six months in another dimension,” He explained, holding up his hand to stop me from immediately responding. “Before you say anything, let me explain the general concept at least.”

He extended his hand again, a map of the east coast popping up. Several hundred dots appeared scattered around, mainly focused on Outer and Inner York City.

“Here is the deal. You would be sent to a preselected Earth that diverges heavily from ours, one where there will be challenges and struggles that you will need to overcome. We will allow you to pick one enhancement from a shortlist beforehand to give you a slight advantage,” He explained, with a fake salesman's smile. “Once you arrive, you will be given this map. The dots, which may or may not be different in the final version, will lead you to further

enhancements or technology. You will have to travel to one, make it through whatever challenge awaits you, and claim the reward to gain access to it.”

The hologram flashed and changed, showing a small off-white crate before shifting to green, then blue, before stopping at purple.

“Some challenges will be easy, such as searching a large mall for the crate, while others will be more difficult, like slaying a dangerous beast or surviving a potentially lethal location. The rewards will reflect the difficulty you faced when earning them. With each one, you will become more and more powerful, and the challenges will increase to reflect that,” He explained, doing his best to make it seem like no big deal. “Once your six months are up, you’ll be brought back here. You’ll have six months to enjoy yourself, basking in the greatest luxuries available, spending plenty of time with your loved ones, and recovering from your ordeal. After that, we will find another dimension for you to explore.”

As he talked, my mind struggled to keep up. What he was offering was beyond insane, beyond what I could wrap my mind around.

“Wh-why me?” I asked, trying to buy time for my mind to catch up. “Why the hell would you pick me?”

“Well... I could say I had some sort of grand reasoning, come up with some sort of lie or cheesy platitude of wanting to give someone who needs it a chance. Which, don’t get me wrong, is a nice addition. Should get plenty of good press,” he said, the last part barely a mumble. “But really, you just got lucky. My department has been keeping an eye open for people who fit our needs. People who are desperate enough to accept the risk, who wouldn’t immediately die, but who will also be legitimately challenged. Sure, we could find some spec op soldier lowie who would eat this challenge for breakfast, but that’s not the point. Your secondary job is high enough stress that we know you can handle that, and you’re desperate

enough to consider this a possible solution. Basically, you're the first fit that we found."

I struggled to wrap my head around his offer, around what he was proposing. It sounded insane, but my brain was slowly coming to terms with the idea. I could already hear my mom shouting that this was ridiculous, forbidding me from even considering it while telling me that putting myself in more danger wasn't worth it.

I knew from personal experience from the accident that took my dad and left my sister in her horrible state that dealing with nobles was always risky. They would keep their word when they signed and made deals, but their word hardly ever meant what you thought it did. The bastard responsible for the accident had thrown money at everyone to handle the situation, but even the large sum we got was nothing compared to Olivia's medical bills. To say I was skeptical of what he was offering was an understatement.

"Now I know that this is a lot to take in all at once," He said, yanking my attention back to the conversation. "So I will leave you with my card. I happen to think you are a pretty good match for what we are looking for. I've done my research, and what I learned was promising. That said, I'm not the only one who is looking. If we stumble on a better match, there's a good chance we will go with them."

As he talked, he stood, my body following suit with what felt like no input from my brain. He reached out with a small chip, no bigger than my thumbnail. The chip lit up with all his contact info when I took it. A useless luxury considering communicator chips only needed to touch to share contact information. No extra device was really needed.

"Think about it, talk to your mother, but get back to me soon," Ilbryen said, giving me a nod. "Times a' ticking!"

He snapped his fingers, and the two deployable chairs folded up and flew into the air, neatly sliding into the passenger seat of his

hovercar. The door shut behind them, and he walked around to the other side, stopping for a moment.

“Oh, I bribed your boss to give you the rest of the day off so you can spend some time thinking of my offer. Caio!”

Before I could say anything else, he climbed into his hovercar, which thrummed with energy as his door shut. Without any fanfare, the angular vehicle rose into the air and blasted off, leaving me alone on the polycrrete platform, still holding the sonic scrubber in one hand and his card chip in the other.

Chapter Five

It took a while for me to get back into the shop, my eyes following the hovercraft until it disappeared into the distance. When I finally recovered enough to head back in, it was only to clock out, my boss hardly even looking at me as I hung up my coveralls. A minute or so later, I was on my cycle, riding along the backroads, my mind slowly starting to break down what Ilbryen had offered. Part of me considered going home, but it was doubtful I would get peace and quiet there.

I drove around for a while, eventually stopping to get some lunch from a cheap fast-food chain. The fact that I was now buying fast food from the same place Ilbryen had gone to make his mess was not lost on me. After putting the bag of grease and salt into the cycle's storage, I pulled out of the parking lot and kept driving, heading to a spot where I occasionally took my lunch breaks.

Eventually, I pulled into a vertical parking structure, heading directly to the back, where I knew there was a big elevator. A quick look around, and I guide my cycle up close before hopping off and guiding it inside, making sure to click on the mass reducers. I could have driven up, but it was forty floors and a pain in the ass on a cycle.

Eventually, the elevator dinged, and I guided my cycle out onto the top level, leaning it against the wall a few feet away. I grabbed my food and walked around the small structure that covered the elevator, which was basically a polycrrete box that protected it from the elements. I walked around the box to the side opposite the parking area, where there was a single old metal chair, a small table, and a pretty decent view of the surrounding neighborhood.

I sat on the chair and put my food bag on the small table, nudging an ashtray to the side. I had found this spot making a delivery to a nearby business and occasionally came here when I needed to think.

Like right now, for example.

The offer was still rattling around in my head. It was insane, something out of a story. I knew that dimensional tech existed, though I had no idea that nobles were using it as entertainment. The concept sounds interesting, if more than a bit mind-blowing. Explore new Earths, and have some fun in a place that is no real threat to you. I could honestly see the appeal.

The idea of being stranded for six months in a place like that, with nothing but a slight advantage to start out with? That idea was a lot less appealing.

Still, I couldn't help but consider it. My whole family, set up for life, enjoying the same luxuries, the same advantages that a noble did...

I had heard plenty of stories, rumors, and tall tales that some nobles elevated lowies that they liked. Some people clung to the idea like a lifeboat, wondering if they would ever meet a noble who would do that. I knew plenty of people who spent a lot of their hard-earned money making themselves as pretty as possible in the hopes of snagging a noble partner just for a taste of that luxury. I knew that it did happen.

I also knew it almost never ended well.

For every fantasy of someone finding a noble lover or friend, I had also heard horror stories of nobles using someone up, bullying them, getting them to do increasingly terrible things, only to cut them loose when they got bored. I'd heard stories of nobles promising to lift people up, only to use them as a glorified slave workforce, all while promising that they would uplift them soon. Rumors went around constantly of this or that person disappearing for weeks, even months, to "party" with a noble only for them to come back... different.

A noble always kept their word, nobody would argue against that. It was just a matter of what they could get from you in the process. They saw us as a resource, like tools, to use and replace when we couldn't function anymore.

I couldn't risk it.

I leaned back in the old metal seat, looking out over the buildings around the parking structure, shaking my head.

The offer seemed too good to be true, which usually meant that was precisely what it was. If I took Ilbryen's insane offer, and something changed, if they decided it wasn't going to work, if they just abandoned me over there, in some sort of hellish version of Earth, my family would never be able to recover. It took me working two jobs, putting almost all of my time into them, plus Mom's three jobs and the occasional bit of help from my older sister to stay afloat. There was no way my Mom could keep paying for Olivia's medications, her doctor's visits, everything she needed to survive, and everyday living expenses. We already cut it pretty close.

I let out a long sigh, opening my food and starting to eat, though my mind was still trying to puzzle out what I should do. Eventually, after about twenty minutes, I finished my food and headed back out of the parking garage.

Pulling into the apartment parking storage about thirty minutes later, I still hadn't come to any actual conclusion. It all boiled down to whether I was willing to trust a noble not to screw me over, and if I was willing to risk what little stability we had in hopes that our life could improve.

I made my way up to our apartment, stepping in and locking the front door behind me. I could hear people talking in hushed tones, so I kicked off my shoes and stepped further in, following the voices. I found my Mom in the living room, talking quietly into her chip, having a quiet yet energetic conversation.

“I know... I understand... If more work-... yes, thank you Caroline...” She said, her chip going dark as whoever was on the other side of the call hung up.

She stayed where she was standing, her head hung, her hand coming up to rub her face. Concerned, I knocked on the wall to get her attention without scaring her. She still whirled around to face me.

“Leon, oh! Welcome home.” She said, quieting herself after getting over her initial surprise. “What are you doing home so early?”

“... Reese gave me the day off,” I lied. “What about you?”

For a long moment, she didn’t respond, just stood there and chewed her lip. She looked away eventually, unable to look me in the eye.

“I... I was let go today.” She explained. “Mr. Sheffield is downsizing and needed to... clear up his slower workers. I was just on the chip with Caroline, asking if her temp agency had any work...”

I closed my eyes for a minute, hanging my own head. Mom stepped closer, giving me a hug.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll find something soon,” She said, leaning on me a bit. “It will just be a tight month.”

“Yeah... yeah. I’ll pick up some extra deliveries... Steve probably has some for me,” I assured her.

In reality, this was a pretty bad time for this to happen. With Alex and his gang undoubtedly taken down by the OYCPD, I had lost one of my higher-paying deliveries. Steve would probably have some extra work for me, and I could reach out to some people and offer lower rates to entice more customers... but it would be hard to match what I was making from them. Still, this wasn’t the first hurdle we had to overcome.

Once again I considered my most recent offer. The sheer ridiculousness of the idea, the level of danger involved with such a concept... it was still hard to comprehend. But I was confident that not indulging in a noble's pipe dream, especially one as dangerous as this, was the right choice. I gave my Mom one final squeeze before pulling back.

"It will be okay. Worst comes to worst I will quit working at the shop and focus on being a courier full time. I know that the garage offers the stability we needed when... In the beginning, but now I have a reputation and a few repeat customers. That's not just going to disappear now."

"Thank you, honey. Your father would have been so proud," She said with a watery smile, cupping my cheek. "I'll send your sister a message and see if she can't spare a bit to help."

I winced slightly but reluctantly nodded as well. I hadn't seen my older sister in around two years, not since she packed up and left one morning. She occasionally sent money to help, but neither of us knew what she was doing. Mom was worried she was wrapped up in some sort of gang or worse, and I didn't have the heart to tell her it was much more likely she had been snapped up by some noble.

"Have you heard from her recently?" I asked, walking around my mother and stepping into our small kitchen.

"Not for the last couple of weeks," She admitted, shaking her head. "She did say she would be swamped last time we did talk, though."

Mom and I spent the rest of the day planning where she would be looking for work and talking about possible ideas to save more money. Unfortunately, the latter part was a familiar conversation that frequently led nowhere. A few hours after I came home, Tyler returned from school, rushing through the apartment before running back out to spend some time with a friend a few

floors down. Mom left with him to walk him down, returning a few minutes later.

Not long after that, Mom and I started working on dinner together, something we hadn't done in a long time. It was nice, even though the reason we were both home at the same time kept nagging at me. The last few days had been eventful, to say the least. Ilbryen's offer still rattled around in my head, though I had concluded that I wouldn't accept. By the time the family gathered around the small kitchen table to eat, I had moved on to worrying if I should call and tell him I wasn't interested or if I should just leave it alone and let him assume for himself.

As we ate dinner we listened to Tyler talk about his day, Mom helping Olivia eat while nodding and smiling. Luckily, neither of them could see the anxiety behind our smiles. Eventually, dinner was done, and Mom helped Olivia back into bed. Between her heavily damaged lungs and atrophied body, just having dinner with us was enough to exhaust her.

While Mom helped Olivia, I helped Tyler with his homework. Or I tried to, at least. My brother had definitely inherited my father's intelligence, easily understanding class lessons. I was basically just there to keep him on task and focused. Half the time, I felt like he was helping me relearn the things I had forgotten from my lessons.

When he finished his homework, he spent some time watching media on his chip while lying in bed, while I compiled a list of people I needed to call for extra work. It wasn't a bad list in the end, and I was relatively sure at least a few of them would be tempted by a small price cut. By the time I was done, Tyler had fallen asleep, his chip turning off automatically when it couldn't track his eyes anymore. I pulled his chip from his hands and placed it on the charger before waking him up gently to rinse his mouth with teeth cleaner. Not long after that, Mom came in to tuck him into bed. I went to sleep not long after, tired from the mentally exhausting day.

The following day went on as usual. Mom was already gone when I woke up, so I got Tyler ready and out the door before helping Olivia take her medication, have a quick breakfast before helping her settle down in the living room. I left immediately after Mrs. Lee arrived.

I made my way directly to Steve's first. Given how long I had been working with him, he was my best bet for more work. Besides, while he probably already knew that something had gone wrong with Alex and his gang, he would also want to hear about what happened from me.

I made good time getting from the apartment to his shop, pulling around back like I had many times before, letting my cycle steady itself as I got off and knocked on his garage door. Almost immediately, the security clamps opened with a heavy metallic *thunk*. I waited patiently for the large door to open, only to lean back instinctively when his face came into view.

Steve looked upset and frustrated, looking at me with a frown and shaking his head.

"Leon. C'mon," He said, simply turning around and walking away, not offering any more explanation.

I followed behind him, my nervousness starting to spike as he led me into his office. He sat down on the other side of a cleared wooden desk. Before I could say anything, he held up a hand, reached into his desk, and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of brandy. He silently poured the two glasses before pushing one toward me.

"Steve, what the fuck is going on?" I asked, taking the glass on autopilot.

"You know I'm not good with words, kid, so I'm just gonna be blunt," He said, taking a sip of his drink before looking directly into my eyes. "You've been blacklisted."

My eyes went wide, my brain chugging to start, unable to wrap my head around what he was telling me. Before I could say anything, Steve continued.

“Alex and a few of his higher-ups managed to escape the bust. I don’t know what you did, but you pissed him off. He is pulling every favor and every dollar he has to make sure that *everyone* knows that the cops were there because of you.”

“I had nothing to do with that! They would have arrested me just as eagerly as them if they had caught me!”

“I know, kid, I know. You’re not the kind of person who would do that, even if your family didn’t depend on you,” Steve said, shaking his head. “But I’ve already gotten three calls from regulars that they won’t accept anything if you show up to drop it off.”

I struggled to understand what he was saying. This job had just become much more important, something I would need to lean into hard to get my family through the next few months! I needed extra work, not this!

“I’m sorry, Leon, you’re not going to be able to find much delivery work around here, at least not for a while. The problem is that while Alex had been getting more and more ornery while building up all the guns I had been selling him, he still had a reputation for running a tight community,” Steve explained with a shrug. “I know he had some ideas that would have changed that, but he hadn’t done anything with them yet. As far as a majority of people know, you sold out a decent and relatively peaceful community to the police for having weapons that you delivered yourself. Your black listing is...almost complete coverage.”

I leaned back in my seat, stunned into silence. A blacklist like that... I wouldn’t be able to deliver anymore. I was done.

Chapter Six

I sat in Steve's office for a while, my brain stuck in a loop, even after he got up and left to tend to his shop. Eventually, I stood up and left, robotically walking out of his office and out the back entrance, my mind still dazed. I needed this work now more than ever before, and it was all gone. Years of working hard to establish a good reputation, working to build relationships with customers and businesses, both legitimate and shady, establishing myself as a neutral courier, making friends in places to keep me out of trouble...

When I finally stopped spiraling, I stood up from the ground, not really knowing when I had sat in the first place. I didn't have time to waste or wallow in self-pity and frustration. My family depended on me. I needed to work this out.

I pulled out my chip and started scrolling through my contacts, mentally reviewing who I could call. While Steve was pretty well connected in terms of gossip and rumors, there was a chance he had misheard or someone had lied to him. I paced around the back of the shop for three hours, making calls and going through my business contacts one by one. I lowered my prices, explained how desperate I was, and even tried to negotiate with people who had been asking about hiring me as a permanent contractor. No one was interested anymore.

That wasn't to say no one listened. I had a few people I knew well enough that they didn't believe the rumors, people like Steve who were smart enough to think for themselves and knew what kind of stakes I was dealing with at home. I also convinced a few people that the rumors weren't true and that I hadn't sold Alex and his community gang out to the cops.

Unfortunately, in the end, it didn't mean anything. While a few people might have believed the truth, their clients might not, and none of them could risk sending me out on deliveries, only to panic their less-than-legal or particularly skittish clientele. Even the

businesses that were above board and legitimate still didn't want someone with a bad reputation working for them.

When my chip contacts went dry, I hopped onto my cycle and peeled out of the back alley, heading straight for the *Spotted Glass*, a bar where the local couriers liked to hang out. I never really spent much time there, I was too busy trying to keep the family afloat, but if I wanted to rebuild my reputation, that was the place to start.

I pulled into the parking lot, planning on going in and just taking a look, but I didn't even make it inside. I was stopped by the door by a bouncer, who I didn't know by name but still recognized.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing here?" He asked, his arm coming up and blocking the door. "After what you did to that community, you're not welcome here."

"Wait, seriously?" I asked, taking a step back. "I didn't do anything, they just wanted someone to blame. I would-"

"Fuck off, Leon. You're not welcome."

For a long moment, I considered pushing the issue, trying to push past him to enter the bar. I was pretty sure I could handle him, but the bulge under his jacket was an issue I wasn't ready to tackle.

"Fine. But Alex pinned this on me, I didn't do anything!"

I left, hopping back on my cycle and pulling out of the small parking lot. I visited a half dozen other places, and while none of them stopped me at the door, all of them asked me to leave after they realized who I was. With my obvious options dried up, I headed home, my mind washed with worry and anxiety.

The same questions replayed in my head over and over, on a constant loop. What was I going to do? How would I pay for Olivia's treatments and still afford to keep the family fed? Why did Alex react like this? Was it because I didn't want to join his community? I knew

he was more than a little full of himself and thought his community was the next big thing, but... this was on a whole other level.

When I finally got home, I parked my cycle in the vertical garage and climbed into the elevator, stepping into the apartment a few minutes later. It was a bit earlier than when I usually got home, but my courier schedule fluctuated a lot, so nobody questioned it. Mom was making dinner and greeted me with a kiss on my cheek.

“How was your day, dear?” She asked.

“It was fine,” I answered reflexively, wincing the second I said it.

I could immediately tell she saw through my attempt to cover up what had happened. She stopped what she was doing and looked at me, opening her mouth to ask what was wrong but stopped when I shook my head. I nodded and looked over her shoulder to where Tyler was sitting at the table. She followed my look and eventually nodded, letting me off the hook for now.

I spent some time with Tyler, helping him with homework while Mom finished making dinner. He completed his math homework in record time, which still astounded me. As I watched him crush his assignment, I asked him why he needed help if it was so easy.

“I... It’s hard to pay attention,” He admitted after finishing a math problem.

“Because it’s too hard?”

“No! It’s just so boring!” He corrected, looking up at me. “We’ve been doing the same stuff for a week, and we won’t move on until after Monday’s unit test. I asked the teacher for something different, but she just looked at me with that empty VI stare.”

He demonstrated by crossing his eyes a bit and opening his mouth as if he had been stunned stupid for a moment. He stopped and looked down at the next problem, finishing it quickly.

“It’s hard to pay attention when it’s so easy,” he said much quieter, mumbling to himself. “It gets boring and hard to focus.”

I kept “helping” him until dinner was ready, leaving to help Olivia to the table. It took a while to get her and her breathing mask set up, though she was always a good sport about it. Once again, I cursed that we couldn’t afford a proper powerchair, not when she never left the house in the first place.

Dinner was quiet, with Tyler picking up on the fact that Mom and I were not exactly in the chatty mood. Once dinner was done, and Olivia and Tyler were back in their rooms, Mom pulled me aside.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, looking concerned.

“I... The guy who I was delivering to, he didn’t get caught during the raid,” I explained, looking down at my hands. “He blamed me for it, though. Claimed I led the cops to him or ratted him out or something. It doesn’t really matter. The bottom line is, I’ve been blacklisted.”

“Wait... does that mean...?”

“It means no one is going to hire me,” I explained. “I spent the whole day calling contacts, riding to customers. I got turned away every time.”

Mom looked at me, her eyes wide. My courier jobs provided a significant portion of our income. If that wasn’t available anymore, there were only so many options, and quite a few were not pretty.

“I... do have an option though,” I said, Mom immediately looking at me, hope in her eyes.

While watching my brother struggle to focus on his slow, boring classwork and my sister, attached to a breathing mask, hanging onto life by a thread, my mind had been going a mile a minute. This was no way for either of them to live. Tyler was clearly too smart to be stuck with basic VI classes, and Olivia was barely functioning, stuck inside all day. Before, when we had no other options but were pulling ourselves through? It felt like it was just the best we could do, but when I had another choice... It just seemed insufficient.

I described the previous day to my Mom, going over the offer Ilbryen had made, about how he had found me, and what it could mean for the family. With every additional word, she seemed more and more horrified at what I was suggesting. On the other hand, I got more and more certain it was the right choice.

“You could get a job, something that actually pays well. We both know you would make a better manager than anyone you work for now,” I explained. “You would have options, ones that actually matter, that aren’t just dead ends!”

“I will not let you put yourself in that kind of danger for a bigger paycheck!” She said, her expression determined and furious. “What kind of mother would I be if I let you do that?”

“But think about it, it’s not just about us, Mom, not just about our problems right now,” I pointed out. “Think about it, our whole family would be lifted up, given opportunities they would never have access to otherwise. Not just us, but Tyler’s kids! Hell, with any luck, Olivia’s kids too!”

At the mention of Olivia having kids, my Mom’s eyes went watery, tears falling down her face, her determination faltering. She looked away from me, starting to stand.

“Mom, when he made the offer, I rejected it pretty easily. I really don’t feel like being an interdimensional gladiator,” I said with a shrug. “But I can’t see any more options... and the opportunity it

provides us? We can't pass them up! I wouldn't be doing it for you. I would be doing it for Tyler and Olivia."

"Leon... What if this noble... had something to do with you being blacklisted?" She asked. "Isn't this all a little suspicious?"

"I thought of that. Trust me, I thought of that," I admitted, studying the glass I was drinking from. "I don't think he is responsible, not because I trust him or anything stupid like that. I don't trust nobles as far as I could throw one. But I'm just an option on a board for him. Maybe he saw me and had some sort of noble breakdown, decided I was the one while cackling maniacally."

Mom snorted through her tears, my teasing breaking through for a moment.

"But I can't imagine he did, not when he could entice pretty much anyone with this idea," I pointed out. "And even if he is responsible, he still made the offer. He may not give two shits about me, or he may have orchestrated a situation where I couldn't refuse. Either way... the family still gets what they need, even more than they need."

Mom looked torn, her heart breaking as her conscience struggled with the concept.

"I can't, it... it would be like trading you for-"

"Don't think about it like that, Mom. You aren't sacrificing me. I have a fighting chance to make it through this." I said with a smile, though I didn't know how much I actually believed it. "Will it be fun? Of course not. But you know I can handle myself when it comes down to it. It's like I'm signing up for the military or something."

Mom was quiet for a long time. Her eyes closed as she held my hand. After a while, she gave me a big hug, holding me close.

“Give me a day. Let me see if I can find something, anything,” She asked, begging really. “It’s... it’s barbaric, I....”

“I know it is, Mom. But it’s also a good solution.”

“What if he goes back on his word? What if he tries to screw us? Force you to work for less?” She asked, growing more and more desperate. “What if he uses us and throws us away.”

“I don’t know. I would probably be signing a contract of some sort,” I pointed out. “You know a noble would never go against a contract.”

The room was silent again, save the sounds of her crying as she tried to come up with a solution that didn’t involve me going on some ridiculous and dangerous “adventure” for the sake of entertainment.

“I know it’s dangerous, Mom. But I’m willing to give it a shot to elevate this family to something better. Tyler is a genius, Mom, I swear, and he is stuck learning from a VI. Olivia deserves better than to waste away, just... waiting for her body to finally give out. I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing it for them, their children, and their children’s children.”

My mother once again tried to stand. This time, having said my piece, I didn’t stop her. She made her way to the hall when I called out to her.

“Mom,” I said, waiting for her to stop, continuing when she did. “I’m calling him tomorrow.”

Silently, without turning back to look at me, she nodded before leaving, walking down the hall to her room. I sat at the table for another ten minutes before getting up and heading to my own room.

Chapter Seven

The next morning I stuck around the apartment for longer than I usually did, my mind going over the choice I was making. I was distracted, but I managed to get Tyler out the door on time and Olivia into her living room chair. I sat and talked with her for a while until Mrs. Lee came to watch over her. Even after that, I hung around some more, watching my sister as she watched media on the wall projector, tabbing through a few different forms before settling on a live stream. The streamer was walking through the streets of a large city, pausing at street vendors to buy food and talk to random people.

The streamer was obviously a lowie, so there wasn't anything extraordinary about where they were going. It was just another lowie city, run down and broken. The only difference between the city the streamer was in and the one outside our apartment was the language on all the signs.

But Oliva was enthralled. She watched with wide eyes, leaning forward in her chair, soaking in every detail and nuance as the streamer walked down a street I could have confused for any alley in our neighborhood.

Mrs. Lee caught me watching, catching my eye. She sighed in understanding, shrugging silently as if to say she knew how heart-wrenching it was to see my little sister clearly entranced by the outside world. Eventually, I turned away, leaving the apartment and heading to the building's elevator, pressing the worn metal button to the top floor. The elevator rose higher and higher, taking a while to reach the top, the door opening with a ding. I took a left, heading up a flight of stairs to a locked door that led to the roof.

With a long sigh, I sat on the last step, my back against the door. Technically I wasn't supposed to be here, as the sixtieth floor was a maintenance floor, but it was worth the risk for some peace and quiet. This was the quietest place in the entire sixty-story

apartment complex, and if I was lucky, no one would decide to head to the roof.

I pulled out my chip and the smaller, ridiculous superfluous contact chip that held Ilbryen's contact info, typing it into my chip's screen in a slow, precise manner. When it was entered, I stared for a long moment before clicking send. The chip buzzed twice before Ilbryen's voice came through the speaker.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"... It's Leon," I responded after a moment's pause. "Leon Draver."

"Ah! Leon, it's good to hear from you," He responded, and I could hear his smug smile through the chip. "What can I do for you?"

Part of me wanted to accuse him of fucking with me, of messing with my life. I had no idea if he was involved, but I wanted to anyway. But I choked it down.

"I'm in," I answered simply.

"That's good to hear, Leon. We were just about to start investigating alternatives," He admitted, my body tensing at the news. "But that's fine. I still think you're a good fit. Alright! I'll send a hovercar to pick you up. We can discuss the specifics and start putting together a contract. Have you told your mother?"

"Yes, she knows," I assured him. "She isn't happy about it, but that doesn't matter. My... circumstances have changed."

"Well... that sounds unfortunate, but I won't deny it works out for us," Ilbryen responded, coughing once before continuing. "I'm sending a car to your apartment block now. We need to discuss the contract before we can start moving your family into better accommodations."

“...Alright.”

“You’re making the right choice Leon. You’re going to be famous! And make so much money your family isn’t going to know what to do with it all. See you soon! Ciao!”

My chip went silent as Ilbryen hung up. I sat on the top step for a long moment, silently contemplating what I had just done. I needed to change into something a bit more presentable and let Mom know where I was going. Eventually, after another minute or so, I took a deep breath and stood up.

I quickly returned to the apartment and rushed through a shower, putting on some good clothes just as quickly. Olivia and Mrs. Lee were both interested in what was happening, but I didn’t have time to explain. Instead, I just kissed Olivia’s forehead, waved goodbye to Mrs. Lee, and rushed out the door again.

It only took a few minutes for my ride to arrive after I got outside, coming down from the air and landing in front of the building entrance. It was a longer hovercar than the one Ilbryen had been driving before, but it had the same white color and angular design as his, with slowly pulsing lights along the edges.

I had just enough time to call Mom and explain that I was going for the day before the hovercar landed.

A moment after it stopped in front of me, there was a soft hiss, and a door opened along the back half of the vehicle. It was empty but well-lit, with comfortable-looking seats and thick carpeting on the floor. I slowly climbed in, bending over to fit before sitting back in the furthest seat from the front. The door sealed itself behind me as I examined the interior. It took me a moment to realize there wasn’t a driver or even a driver’s seat as the passenger seats continued to the front.

The hovercar lifted away and into the air, the view clear from the interior, despite the windows having been pitch black from the

exterior. I watched as we flew higher and higher, traveling quickly across the city. It would have taken me hours to travel this far on my cycle, but it only took the hovercar a handful of minutes. We soon crossed out of Outer York City and into Inner York City, the view changing dramatically as we did, starting right when we passed over the massive wall buildings that lined the Inner York City exterior.

The buildings were immaculate, polished, and shiny in a way I had never seen before, all absolutely massive. Not a single building I saw looked smaller than fifty stories. Many of the buildings were decorated with murals that stretched dozens of floors, all done with vibrant colors. I initially assumed they were advertisements, but I soon realized they were all just decorations. The art was clean and vivid, and as we passed one building, the woman detailed on the side waved, seemingly at my car in particular. I couldn't help but stare in wonder. Even the roads were different. The gray-black ferrophalt I was used to from Outer City roads was replaced entirely with trees, flowers, and grass.

The roads weren't the only place that was green either. Many buildings had rooftop gardens, and even more had bridges connected to nearby buildings, each laden with greenery. I could just barely make out the people walking around on them.

I could see hundreds, maybe thousands of hovercraft moving around, which explained why my vehicle had slowed down considerably. There were also plenty of hoverbikes, boards, and even a handful of people flying unaided, soaring through the air with their arms extended. It seemed like chaos, with no lanes or organization to it, but considering there weren't any fireballs or crashes that I could see, there must have been something directing them all.

The city was perfectly organized, with the tallest skyscrapers congregating in the center, with buildings getting lower and lower until they reached the last row of space in Inner York City. The buildings that formed the wall separated the outer and inner sections

were half as tall as the highest skyscraper in the center and only had windows facing in.

Every inch of the inner city was pristine, maintained, and decorated. It made me even more certain I was making the right choice. If my family could live here for the rest of their lives and their kids' lives, then putting myself in danger was worth it.

Eventually, the hovercar reached its destination, a large building only a few roads away from the center megatowers. It was tall and shaped like a pentagon, with every tenth or so floor open to the air, with vines and other plants hanging down from the building supports.

As the hovercar slowed near the building, it swung sideways, sliding up to a specific floor about two-thirds of the way up the tower. A platform, complete with railings, almost seemed to pour from the walls, seemingly flowing into shape. The hover car rested against it perfectly, the door popping open with another hiss.

As the door opened, the exterior glass panel seemed to shudder before slowly rolling up like a garage door. I could have sworn it was standard glass, too, as it was way too clear to be the tougher glass substitute most outer city buildings used. As the glass finished rolling up, I climbed out of the hovercar, taking one tentative step on the outcropping balcony before stepping across it into the building. I could hear the hovercar door hissing shut before the glass door started to close behind me.

Everything about the room I stepped into screamed wealth. It was covered with wood paneling that formed sleek walls. There was even a water feature along the opposite wall that filled the room with soothing water sounds. On the nearest wall were two large doors, which only went up about two-thirds the height of the total room. It looked like there was more space as a railing ran along the length above the door. Before I could move around and get a closer look at the room, one of the large doors opened, and a black-haired woman around my age stepped out.

She was dressed in a simple black pencil skirt, blazer, and white blouse. She was perfectly unremarkable, which confused the hell out of me. Was she a lowie that Ilbryen hired?

“Leon Draver?” She asked with a smile.

“That’s me....” I responded with a nod.

“If you would please come with me then, Mr. Middison is waiting for you in his office.”

The woman turned and started walking away without another word, and I quickly moved to follow her. As we walked, her heels clicked on the floor, and I couldn’t help but notice how off her movement was. It wasn’t overtly noticeable, but I was already focused on her because she looked normal. It was... almost like someone tried to make her movement as fluid as possible but ended up making her just a bit *too* fluid. Like every step was calculated.

She led me through a hallway to another set of doors, pausing for a moment before stepping in and holding the door open.

“Mr. Middison, Mr. Draver is here for you.”

Ilbryen was sitting at a huge, dark red wooden desk with a massive array of text, screens, and video feeds projected into the air above it, which moved and changed quicker than I could really register any of it. The noble was silent for a few seconds, staring ahead blankly before he blinked a few times and seemed to come to.

“Ah! Welcome! Please, take a seat!” He said, gesturing to the seat in front of his wooden desk.

I don’t think I had ever seen so much natural wood around in one place before. It must have cost him a fortune. Regardless, I nodded and sat down in the chair while Ilbryen focused on his assistant.

“Grab us some drinks, some Hydro-Europa, maybe?” Ilbryen asked, looking back at me.

“I... I don't know what that is,” I said, shrugging. “But sure, as long as it's not going to put me at a disadvantage.”

“Oh, I wouldn't do that,” Ilbryen assured me with a wide smile. “And not just because any agreements reached under the influence of mind-altering substances would be voided.”

I opened my mouth to comment, but after a moment, I decided to remain silent. Ilbryen seemed to appreciate this as he started going through some stuff on his desk before finally appearing ready to talk. When his assistant returned carrying water bottles, he caught me watching her movement.

“Do you like her?” He asked, smirking as I looked confused. “I paid a small stipend for her, didn't I?”

“I would argue I was well worth the credits, sir,” She responded, already turning to leave. “And I am obligated to remind you that you are not allowed to divulge the details of my purchase.”

“I know, I know,” He responded, waving her out of the room before focusing on me. “It's a VI assistant, one of the more advanced models too. She is almost completely independent.”

“She... She wasn't real?!” I asked, turning in my chair to try and catch another glimpse of her.

“Nope! Completely artificial robotics! I joke, but her company makes great assistants. I wouldn't know how to get through the day without her.”

“How... Why...?” I take a deep breath and shake my head softly before letting it out. “You know what, cool, great. It's fine, great. Maybe I'll get one for Mom to help her keep the house clean.”

Ilbryen chuckled and nodded, though he kept quiet for a long moment, taking a sip of his water. I followed suit and took a small sip of mine. It tasted like mineral water, but beyond that, it was completely normal. After another moment, he smiled and leaned forward in his chair.

“Alright, I would imagine you would have some questions?” He asked.

I snorted and nodded, pulling out my chip and flicking it active, pulling up a note-taking app and scrolling through. I opened my mouth to ask a question, but before I could start, Ilbryen raised his hand.

“Before you start, keep in mind that we will be going through the specific legal mumbo jumbo that will end up on the final contract soon, so questions like ‘how much money’ and stuff like that should be saved until then,” He explained. “I can give you general estimates, but this is a much more informal meeting.”

I mulled around what he said for a long moment before nodding and picking a different question.

“What kind of... upgrades would be on the other side?” I asked, looking up at the noble businessman.

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t tell you exactly, as that would spoil the fun, but I can give you some general ideas,” He responded, gesturing over his desk for a moment.

The desk lit up and projected an image of a familiar off-white crate, the images shifting through green, blue, and purple. They also shifted in size and shape, always marked by the same colors.

“As I mentioned, the containers will scale with the challenges you face, with white boxes being the most common and easy and purple being the rarest and most difficult,” the noble explained. “You can expect things like body-enhancing serums and augments,

weapons, clothes, equipment, food, and a large variety of potential aids. Everything will work together, as we will only send compatible upgrades. That said, you may find serums or augments that overlap. In that case, using them will override or replace the previous improvement. Or you could hold on to it for later.”

“And you said I would get a map?”

“That’s right, good memory! Unfortunately, a colleague of mine feared that having a full map would make it too easy. So instead, your map will show the location of all purple containers, most blue, some green, while all white boxes will be hidden unless you are within one hundred meters of one. The rest of the hidden crates will show up if you’re within three hundred meters.” He explained, an annoyingly chipper look on his face. “That way, you can’t just grab all of the white crates easy-peasy!”

“Great, I was definitely worried about it being too easy,” I said sarcastically, though Ilbryen didn’t seem to even catch it. “What about my family’s living conditions, Oliva-”

“The company is already working on setting up the procedures she will most likely need,” He explained, waving it away like it was simple. “I was not kidding when I said by this time next week, Oliva would be walking around, smelling the flowers.”

I let out a deep breath, a heavy weight lifted off my shoulders. This would all be worth it just to get her the help she desperately needed.

Over the next hour or so, I asked as many questions as I could think of, confirming and resolving everything I had written down on my phone. He explained that yes, I could die over there and that there would be an agreement to take care of my family as if I were a normal noble who had died at work. He confirmed that the other dimension was an early Earth that destabilized around 2040. He admitted the specifics were lost on him, but according to the geeks, the destabilization was caused by a comet strike releasing

some sort of mutagenic material into the air. They already had serum for me that would prevent its effects, designed off of previous samples. I would be completely immune to its effect.

He was more than a bit hesitant to reveal any specifics about the dangers I would face. Still, he did admit that the mutagenic material had affected a considerable portion of the wildlife of that Earth.

Eventually, I ran out of questions, or at least questions he was willing to answer. The premise was simple enough that there wasn't much room for details that I could use to my advantage. I would go over to this mutated Earth, spend six months surviving, and then return. While I was over there, I would be entirely on my own, with no support from this Earth, even if it meant me dying.

The biggest thing I managed to tease out of him was that I would have some sort of entertainment stipulation in my contract. I couldn't just bunker down in a hole and wait six months. I would need to do things, actually, go out on "adventures." I had assumed there would be some sort of stipulation like that, but it was still worrying to hear about.

When I eventually left, it was late in the afternoon, and Ilbryen walked me out, the same hovercar waiting for me on the strange walkway. He assured me that he would have a rough contract written up by the afternoon of the following day and that another car would be sent to pick me up.

Chapter Eight

The next few days went by in a blur.

Eventually, I did manage to get through to Mom. She still hated that I was putting myself in so much danger, but she respected that it was my choice, and I wanted to provide a better life for her and my siblings. She was still clearly upset, but she had accepted it.

Tyler stayed home from school the next few days, and we spent as much time together as a family as possible, hanging out and talking for most of it. Despite being a young kid, Tyler recognized something was up pretty quickly. I explained to him that I was going to be going away to work, doing a job that would be pretty dangerous but would let him and Olivia live a much better life. I think he understood most of it, but the real danger I would be in didn't really click for him, which I was thankful for.

Olivia, however, understood it completely. Her brush with death left her a bit more mature and understanding of how scary life could be. She cried herself to sleep the night I told her, scaring my mother in the process.

I left the house to sign the contract a few days after my meeting. The same hovercar as before picked me up and dropped me off at the same office in the inner city sometime in the early afternoon. This time Ibryen met me at the entrance and guided me into a board room, already occupied with two other people, lawyers apparently, one for me and one representing Ibryen's company.

We discussed the contract at length, which was written in surprisingly simple language. Everything we discussed was there: a company apartment in the inner city, a multi-million dollar contract signing bonus, a monthly salary that tripled our combined current income, a company hovercar, full coverage insurance, and a substantial payout if I died while in another dimension. We would all be given noble citizenship, and every time I traveled to another

dimension, the family would receive another bonus of five million credits. There was no fine print, no secret deals, or underhanded clauses. When I commented on it, Ilbryen chuckled.

“I won’t lie, Leon. Plenty of nobles would consider it a point of pride to use contracts to sneak underhanded deals in. But this venture depends greatly on you being satisfied enough with the deal to do your part, completely unprompted by us. We figured the best way to do that was to make sure you were happy and weren’t worried about what we managed to sneak past you.”

We discussed the contract for a while longer. Eventually, I voiced a concern that even if my family would be living off more money than they ever had access to before, they would still be lowies in the eyes of everyone around them. They would still be poor by noble standards.

“Oh, it doesn’t quite work like that for nobles,” Ilbryen said, waving away my concerns.

I looked at him expectantly, prompting him to sigh and continue to explain what he meant.

“Most of us are given access stipends from our family fund, not the entire fortune. We are expected to contribute to the family, even if it’s just climbing the social ladder. The more we contribute, the more we get,” He explained, with just a hint of a patronizing tone. “Your family will have plenty, and with your bonuses, you could save and create a small fortune for your siblings to build with. Assuming they can make it in the noble business world. Besides, most of the basics in golden cities are free.”

Trying to keep my mind from exploding over the fact that daily living expenses are usually much *lower* for a noble than a lowie, I focused on the contract again. After a few more questions, I was finally confident enough that I wasn’t getting absolutely scammed. I signed the contract and slid it to Ilbryen’s lawyer, who took a quick look at it, scanned it with his chip, and slid it into a

protective sleeve. I was home again within an hour, explaining that we would be moving the next day.

It took less than two hours to move everything we owned, which was worth keeping, at least, into our new apartment. The apartment was massive and open, with huge windows letting plenty of sunlight. The kitchen and dining room alone were just over half the size of our old apartment.

The walls facing the city were open and showed off the massive, greenery-laden bridge connecting us to our neighbors across the street. There were five bedrooms in total, meaning that none of us had to share, and we even had a spare. The living room was also huge, with a wall that clicked on into a media screen taller than I was.

Tyler was a hyperactive laser, running from room to room, gasping at each new and shiny thing he found. When he realized that the house's VI could respond to him calling out, he spent twenty minutes shouting commands, the windows blacking out and clearing a dozen times before Mom got him to stop.

I could tell Mom was more than a little overwhelmed, her head spinning from everything changing so fast, not to mention still emotionally confused about what I would be enduring to let the family enjoy this new life. When a hover drone dropped off our new citizenship records, gold embossed and denoting our new status, she finally broke down, hugging me tight and thanking me, simultaneously cursing the necessity.

The changes kept on coming. A private tutor, a noble dressed in a shocking red suit with glowing blue eyes and some sort of jaw augment, stopped by to evaluate Tyler and see how he compared to standard noble schooling. He was behind, but the tutor was confident he would catch up and excel based on how quickly he was bridging gaps between some of the questions she asked. She admitted she had been hesitant to work with a family so recently elevated but had been impressed by Tyler's intelligence. She left her

card behind and asked that we consider her when looking for long-term tutors.

Not long after that, a doctor came by to take a look at Olivia. She was clearly nervous and admitted she was scared they wouldn't be able to help her. The doctor only chuckled and promised her that there was always something that they could do, and in the absolute worst-case scenario, they could clone her an entirely new body and transplant her brain into it.

I suspected that the doctor meant this as a way to reassure her, but he underestimated how unfamiliar we were with noble medicine. Olivia's eyes went wide, and she began to panic, almost fainting from the strain. We managed to calm her down, and the doctor apologized. He took some scans with a device he carried in his doctor's bag, the device beeping and whistling, a red light glowing on its screen, which he tapped.

"So it appears the contamination is mostly in her lungs," He explained, focusing primarily on the scanner he was still holding. "We will have to clone-grow her new ones since it would be impossible to extract all of the particles with surgery, especially with her current state."

As he explained this, the scanner projected a detailed image of her lungs, showing off the contaminated sections.

"She has damage in most of her other organs, though that appears to be mostly healed. We can repair the remaining damage with a full immersion Vita-Gel soak. She will have to stay in it overnight, but as a bonus, if we wait until after the replacement surgery, it will all but erase her healing time. After that, she would need a full array of the usual recovery treatments to completely heal. If I take some samples back to the clinic with me, we can get started on her lungs and be ready for the replacement and the Vita-Gel in a few days."

All three of us listened to the doctor talk in his casual, matter-of-fact tone, our eyes getting wider with each statement. I could see my mom's eyes start to water as she realized that Olivia was finally getting proper treatment.

The doctor took a blood and tissue sample with a small tool, painlessly holding it against Olivia's arm. After that, he quickly packed up his equipment and left, promising to call within the next two days.

We decided to order from a nearby restaurant to celebrate the good news and new home. Of course, we didn't realize until after we started eating that because we were now in the inner city, the food would be unbelievably good.

The frantic schedule only picked up from there. I had dozens of tests, samples, and scans run throughout the next few days, so they could prepare and calibrate all of the serums and equipment they would be sending over for me to find. Luckily we had the company car, but I found myself missing my cycle, which I had been forced to leave behind. I decided that if... when I got home, I would buy a better one to ride around the city. I wouldn't need it, but making it through six months of hell was reason enough to splurge.

The whirlwind of activity continued before seeming to freeze and stick when we brought Olivia in for her treatment. She went into the surgery suite after giving us each a hug and kiss and didn't emerge for three hours. By then, she was immersed in a see-through tube of pale green gel, floating like she was neutrally buoyant. She had a scar along her chest, where they had clearly cracked her open to remove her old lungs and replace them.

I would have been embarrassed with her being on display like that if I hadn't been helping her dress and stay clean for the past four years.

She stayed immersed for two days, much longer than the doctor had initially thought, but in the end, she came out with a

smile. She took a deep breath as she opened her eyes for the first time and tensed, clearly expecting a racking cough. Instead, her eyes went wide.

“I... I can breathe!” She said, her voice faint but full of emotion. “It’s so easy!”

Mom held her as she cried tears of joy, reveling in her new ability to take a full breath without coughing up blood.

She wasn’t the only one under the doctor’s care. I spent one of those nights dunked in a tank as well, the doctors using the green, breathable gel to administer the preventative mutagen protection and give me a general tune-up. I felt considerably better when I woke up from my ten-hour dunk than when I had gone in. The doctor laughed and nodded without any surprise.

“With how much smog hangs around in Outer York City? You may as well have been dragging cigos by the pack,” He said, shaking his head.

I immediately asked them to make an appointment for my mom and Tyler, though they would most likely go a while after I had already left.

For now, there was just too much to get done. New clothes to buy, a house to fill and decorate, a city to explore, and a new lifestyle to settle into. I knew I wouldn’t be here for very long, at least not until I made it back, but Mom needed all the help she could get, especially since all of this was as new to her as it was to us. I helped where I could, ending up on the phone with Ilbryen a few times with questions, which he gladly answered. There was a lot to get used to.

Throughout all of this, I spent as much time as possible with everyone, doing my best to make the most of the last few days before I had to leave. I also did my best to make it feel like I was going on a trip, rather than being sent off to die, even if some of me

understood it was a real possibility. Internally I was getting more and more nervous, but I managed to mostly keep it to myself.

I took Tyler on hovercar rides, sitting in the back seat of the vehicle as we flew around the inner city, his face pressed against the window, watching other cars and people fly around. I had to clearly explain that the people who were flying around, seemingly unaided, were using some sort of expensive tech that he did not have. I then had to explain that he wouldn't be able to get it until he was older and only if he did well in classes.

Olivia was much more sedate, as was expected. There was some sort of delay in getting her recovery treatment, but since her lungs were perfect after her surgery, she was chomping at the bit to go outside. So we spent most of our time walking through the city along the garden roads, Olivia in a wheelchair that I would push. Her eagerness and excitement about a simple walk was contagious.

With everything happening so fast, it was no wonder time went by too quickly. Before I knew it, Ibryen called and told me it was time, that the geeks in the lab were ready, and that final preparations were complete. The house was quiet when I told Mom, my two siblings quickly picking up on the anxiety I was feeling and the tears welling up in Mom's eyes.

Chapter Nine

“You’re going to feel a slight pinch....” The doctor said, a nameless science team member working on getting everything ready, including myself.

I watched as he pushed a thick needle, the fifth in a long series of mostly painless injections, each one pushing a small piece of hardware into my body. According to the nameless doctor, they were painlessly attaching themselves to my bones. They would function as the foundation for many of the physical modifications that would be waiting to help me in the collapsed Earth. They itched like a bastard after each insertion.

“I get it. You don’t have to tell me every time it’s going to sting,” I said, the scientist looking up at me and nodding.

My mom was sitting beside me, holding my hand and chewing her lip, her eyes red and puffy but finally dry. It seemed like she was all out of tears.

“I want you to play it safe, you hear me?” She asked, repeating what she had said a hundred times by now. “I know... I know you have to be entertaining, but....”

“I’ll try my best, Mom,” I assured her, the doctor giving me a look as he injected the next piece.

I looked around, watching as engineers, scientists, and plenty of other people all went about their business, preparing for my departure. In the center of the room was a familiar pair of arches, with a small person-sized box in the center. While I saw that the door into the box was open, I couldn’t see into it from my angle.

I could see a large viewing window on the far side of the room, up against the ceiling. I could just make out Ilbryen through

the thick glass, having a conversation with someone in a lab coat. He spotted me looking and waved before turning back and finishing his discussion. When he was done, he quickly left the observation platform and made his way to me, walking down a set of stairs to get to us. He had a sturdy-looking briefcase in one hand that I didn't notice until he got closer.

"Leon, Mrs. Draver," He said politely, giving my mom a small smile. "Mrs. Draver, would you like to join us in mission control? It is the only place to watch the transmission safely."

Mom looked at me, and I nodded with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. She gave me a big hug, one I returned despite the doctor trying to stick my bicep with another thick needle. I held her for a long time, rubbing her back before pushing her back slightly.

"I'm going to kick ass, I promise. I'll be back before you know it," I promised her.

She nodded and gave me another hug. I watched Ibryen gesture to his robotic assistant, who stepped forward with a smile.

"Get Mrs. Draver situated up in mission control," He told her, the lifelike robot nodding in response. "Get her something to drink as well, and make sure she has company."

Mom gave my hand one last squeeze before letting the robot assistant, who she probably didn't realize was a robot, lead her through and out of the busy working space. We were quiet for a minute before the scientists stuck me with another needle, and I cursed in surprise.

"Right, well, I think now is as good a time as any to pick your starting bonus," He said, giving me a smug smile before cracking open the briefcase and showing its contents off.

The interior was cushioned by some sort of soft-looking material, smooth and cut out to perfectly hold four vials, each one a

different color, yellow, green, blue, and red. Each of the vials was sealed, with a metal cap on the bottom that ended in an open flat circle.

“Alright! So as you probably guessed, these are what the serums I’ve mentioned a few times are most likely going to look like,” He explained, setting the briefcase down on the empty space beside me. “These are just four of the many types already waiting for you on Alt Earth. My boss okayed me to tell you that these are just the first tier of strength, healing, metabolism, and durability. You’ll be able to find more of these as well as a slew of other serums. Some of them, like these, will stack up to around seven or eight doses of the same serum. Others are more unique and will only work once.”

I nod and look down at the briefcase, putting my hand on the edge.

“Now I’m sure you can figure out what the strength and durability serums do. They aren’t very complicated, at least not at this tier. Metabolism lessens how much sleep and food you need by making your stomach and insides more efficient and letting you eat more... questionable things. Healing gives you just a touch of regeneration. It isn’t going to let you regrow limbs or your brain, but it will keep you from bleeding out if an artery gets nicked and regenerate your nerves if you get spinal damage.”

My eyes go wide, and I open my mouth to pick the healing serum, but he raises his hand to stop me.

“Just a little warning, these aren’t magic. The materials they use have to come from somewhere, meaning you need to be eating, which goes double for the healing serum,” He explained. “It will use any fat reserves you have first, but after that, it will slow down. Basically, if you’re starving, you’re stuck with normal healing. Also, don’t forget we have already boosted your immune system, so you don’t have to worry about infections or diseases.

I stopped and thought it through again, keeping in mind Ilbryen's warning, before finally shaking my head.

"Doesn't matter. Being able to heal better is too important to pass up," I said, looking at him confidently. "Give me the healing."

"Alright!" He said, picking out the green serum and jamming it against my leg.

The pain was searing and deep, like a hot liquid pouring into my leg, spreading down and up my body until my whole leg felt warm. It kept spreading, the pain and heat getting less and less severe each moment until my entire body felt just the slightest bit of warmth. After a few minutes, even that faded.

"Mr. Middison, I would have preferred if you waited for that until after I was done with these," The doctor working on my injections said, though he only got a shrug in response.

"It's fine. You just need to be a bit quicker and double-check the connections when you're done," Ilbryen responded, the doctor frowning but staying silent. "Okay, now for a little secret Leon. I kept all hush-hush about this because I'm pretty sure my colleagues would have shot me down if I asked permission to tell you this."

He leaned in, prompting me to lean in as well. The doctor watched us for a moment, a weird look on his face before he returned to his work, seemingly determined to ignore us.

"The tech comes in two forms on the other side. Stuff that will bind with you and stuff that doesn't. Anything that requires what the good doctor here is putting into you will not function for anyone but you," He explained with a conspiratory smile. "But everything else will work for anyone. The serums are, by default, safe for everyone. If they have some sort of reaction or aren't compatible, the serum just shuts down and gets absorbed by the body. Now, this is very important because while the human population is down to a fraction of what it was... they are still around. Keep that little nugget to yourself, alright?"

Ilbryen patted my back and turned, heading away as the doctor finally finished his injections. Before I could get up, though, he shook his head and held me down gently.

“Not quite yet, Mr. Draver. You need a tracker and your map installed, then I need to test to make sure that everything is stable,” He explained, putting away the injection needles.

He mumbled under his breath, something about idiots not understanding how precise something needed to be before he finished cleaning up. He lined up a few more things before sitting back down beside me and getting back to work.

I watched with wide eyes as he numbed my arm and placed a device around it, locking it in place around my forearm. It vibrated for a second before he deftly sliced into my arm, creating a two-inch long cut in my forearm. He pushed something into the cut, a small metal contraption that I could feel grip my body, sealing itself and connecting to my flesh.

While I couldn't feel the cutting, I could absolutely feel the difference when the device fused itself to me, leaving a triangle of metal visible on my skin. The doctor, whose name I still didn't know, rubbed a blue slime around the device, the semi-liquid goop absorbing into my arm in seconds.

“...Alright, that should be all healed up,” He said, wiping off my suddenly not numb arm before looking up at me. “Do me a favor and give it a tap for me?”

I looked at him for a second before reaching with my other hand and tapping the triangle, surprised to find that it wasn't solid metal like I had expected but some sort of flexible metallic material that felt like cold, smooth skin. The doctor guided my hand away again, and suddenly the triangle beeped and projected a map into the air. It looked incredibly similar to the one Ilbryen had shown me the other day, though there weren't any colored marks yet.

The doctor spent five minutes running me through the projector's features, including how I could manipulate the map with my fingers and use the projector as a small light. The most important use, besides its actual map function, was that it would interface with any of the rewards I could find and give me a short description, along with an instruction manual if needed. When the doctor was confident the device worked, he started working on my back, inserting a small tracking device that fused itself to one of the bones in my shoulder.

"This is so our drones can find you," He explained. "Wouldn't want them to lose you, then we wouldn't record all of the footage!"

He chuckled, and I could feel him rubbing the same healing gel on my back before the sensation returned to it. It finally seemed as if he was done cleaning up the empty containers and his workstation before giving me a nod.

"Good luck!" He said, and promptly walked away.

For a moment, I was alone, looking around the large room, watching everyone get everything set and ready. Before long, Ilbryen joined me again, sitting beside me where the doctor had been just a few minutes ago.

"Alright! Everything is more or less ready to go, so let's go over everything one last time," He said seriously, prompting me to stand up as he walked further into the room. "You're going to get all nice and cozy inside this thing. It's got a fancy name and cost millions of credits in rare metals and alloys, but I've just been calling it the box. You climb into the box, and all my highly trained engineers and scientists send you to Alt Earth. You'll have five invisible drones following you twenty-four-seven, transmitting their footage back to the box, which has an inter-reality transceiver."

The noble businessman led me around the platform, all of the clearly busy personnel giving us a wide berth as we moved.

Eventually, we had completed a circle around the platform, stopping by the side closest to mission control.

“Now you don’t have to worry about any of that,” He assured me, smiling wide as he looked back at me. “All *you* have to worry about is kicking ass and being entertaining. When your six months are up, you return to where the box landed, climb back in, and we will zap you back.”

I nodded along as he talked, my mind spinning with anxiety. I was doing my best to keep up and not throw up. Once he was done with his little speech, Ilbryen led me up platform stairs and under the transference arches, stopping in the center of the platform, his hand on the box.

“So... You ready?” He asked, prompting me to swivel my head and stare at him.

“Right now?” I asked.

“When else? Did you think we were getting everything ready for a dry run?” He asked with a shrug. “Time is money Leon, and this project has been spending it left, right, and center. Time to make some money back by starting to broadcast!”

I could feel my panic rising for a moment, but I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and slowly let it out.

I was ready.

“Let’s do it then,” I said with forced confidence.

“Great! Alright, get on in! I’ll be watching from mission control.”

I climbed the last step, and a worker started reviewing the safety procedures. Basically, once the transmission started, I had to stay inside the box, or the energy would more or less evaporate me

into dust. I also needed to stay inside the box until I got the green light, which would take a few minutes even after I arrived.

I nodded and listened closely, committing the relatively simple warnings to memory before the worker helped me climb into the box, sealing me inside the thick-walled protective shell. The door locked closed with a heavy thunk and hiss. After that, all I could hear was my own breathing.

I watched through a small viewscreen attached to the inside of the door as the room quickly cleared out, scientists and engineers running around as they prepared. A screen across the room lit up and showed a frozen countdown from ten. I closed my eyes and took another long deep breath, letting it out slowly.

After a few more minutes, the countdown started, ticking down from ten. It felt like the slowest countdown I had ever experienced, each second taking an eternity. The arches began to spark at seven, and red energy began to flare and grow around them. At five, the energy was swirling around the platform, cutting off my view of the room save for the occasional peek.

I could feel the box vibrating as the energy swirled around faster and faster. Red lightning arced from the roiling spinning energy cloud, striking the ground and the box.

I just managed to catch the countdown as it went from two to one before all the gaps in the spinning energy storm were filled. A pause, a single breath, and suddenly everything shuddered, once, then again, before I could feel my stomach drop out from under me.

The box was in free fall.

A little timer at the bottom of the view screen, the only color on the screen, showed that I was falling for one second... two.... Five... ten, before the shuddering stopped and suddenly the falling sensation was gone, despite not having landed on anything. The screen blinked, and suddenly, I was blinded as the once-dark view

was replaced with the open, blue sky. A few clouds were making their way across the open expanse, but beyond that, it was a clear, clean blue.

I had arrived at Alt Earth.

Chapter Ten

It took a few minutes for the box's door to unlatch, a green blinking light marking it safe for me to push open. For a moment, I sat there, still in the box, blinking away the harsh sunlight. The box's interior had clearly been even darker than I had realized. I stepped out when my eyes had acclimatized, taking a few steps into a new, entirely different world.

The sky was still blue, but what the viewscreen hadn't shown was that I had been placed on top of a tall building surrounded by buildings of similar height. In the direction the box was facing, most of the buildings were smaller than the one I was on. In the other direction, however, most of them were much taller.

The city itself was in rough shape, with dozens of buildings wholly or partially collapsed, with at least one skyscraper among the latter group. A whole line of buildings was smashed underneath one such massive collapsed structure. It wasn't hard to pick out the cause of that destruction either.

Hanging from, through, and around the city was a massive system of purple vines. They were choking the city, smashed through walls, growing out of broken windows, and in a few cases that I could see, completely covering the collapsed wreckage of a destroyed building. The vines varied in size and thickness, from as thick as my thumb to a monstrously massive stalk that curved around the tallest skyscraper I could see.

"Fuck me..."

The vines were even grown around the roof of the building I was standing on, curling around the railing, vents, and whatever else was up there. The box was resting on one of the only clear spaces on the roof, most of the hundreds of tendrils leading back to a trunk almost as thick as my torso. I stepped toward the trunk, peering closer but careful not directly touching anything.

The vine was mainly purple, with a dark red underlayer below the bark-like layer around it. I could smell a sweet, saccharine scent coming from it as well. I stood back quickly, suddenly wary of the purple plant. The fact that the smell made me want to lick it was an excellent sign to never actually do that.

The fact that the dark red layer underneath the bark looked horrifyingly similar to bloody meat didn't help either.

I looked around the roof and spotted a door leading to a staircase downwards, partially busted open by vines. I took one step toward it before cursing softly to myself.

"C'mon Leon, let's keep the dumb, impulsive shit to a minimum," I said before looking down at my arm and tapping the metallic triangle.

The holographic map popped up, showing the city around me, going as far as to display collapsed buildings and many particularly large vines. It also showed four colored dots. I could see one purple in the far corner, a blue in the exact opposite corner, and one green that was only a few buildings away. There was also a single white dot marked as being somewhere below me. I zoomed in on the map to confirm it was in the same building as me.

"Well...no time like the present," I mumbled, looking around one more time before heading to the doorway.

I now had my first two goals in mind. The first was to make my way down to the white crate and secure my first reward. It would probably not be much, but every advantage would help.

My second goal was to get the fuck out of the city. While it was tempting to stay here as it would probably be full of things to salvage, food, and equipment, it was also most likely a death trap. I would have no way of knowing if a building was safe until I had cleared it completely, a simple task for a small house or business, but for the massive, dozen-floor-tall buildings around me, it would be

a nightmare. Plus, I had no way of knowing if a building was structurally safe or not beyond a barely informed guess.

I stepped into the dark stairwell of the building, paying close attention and making sure to avoid the vines that had crawled up the stairs. There was just enough room to carefully make my way down, taking it slow and steady. Eventually, I made it down three floors before the path down was blocked by a massive vine that had burst through the wall.

“Fuck... This building might be less stable than I thought.”

I spent a minute trying to see if there was an easy way to get around the vine, eventually turning around and climbing back to the third floor down from the roof. The door onto that floor was stuck, but I shoved it open with a quick shoulder check.

I stepped into the new space, my head on a swivel. While Ilbryen had been vague in what was waiting for me, I knew it would be dangerous. Luckily the windows and walls around the exterior of the building had been cracked open enough by the vines that plenty of light was coming in. I started looking for another stairwell, sure that a building this size would have at least two.

I still activated my projector, checking to see how many floors down the white crate was before adjusting it into a flashlight.

After a minute or so of looking, scanning the offices and cubicles that filled the building, I found another stairwell marked by an emergency exit sign. I grabbed the handle and pulled, tugging it for a moment before it suddenly came unstuck and swung open. I took one step into the stairwell and turned my arm around to scan with the light before jumping back.

“Holy fuck!” I yelled, my voice carrying down the stairwell, echoing back to me after a moment.

I was too focused on what I had stumbled on to care about my failure to keep quiet, though. Laying back on the stairs up was a humanoid's dried, leathery remains. Lodged firmly in its skull was a fire axe with a worn, red axehead and an orange, polymer handle. I stared at the corpse for a long moment, slowly recovering from the shock. It was obviously not human, as its lips were pulled back enough that I could see it only had a few solid blocky teeth. Its head was also the wrong shape, the top of its skull almost completely flat, though it was split by the axe. Its arms were too long, and the hands, one of which was wrapped around the axe head, only had three fingers and a thumb.

And its skin was almost the exact same shade of purple as the vines.

I scanned the stairwell, looking down the stairs and seeing it was almost completely clear. I paused and turned back to the corpse, stepping closer and putting my foot on its face before trying to pull the axe out. It took a few tries before I managed to yank it free. I examined the weapon closely. I checked to see if there were any cracks in the composite handle or chips in the metal head before giving the corpse one last look and setting down the stairs.

Feeling a bit more confident with something to defend myself with, even if it was pretty basic, I climbed down two more floors, constantly checking my map. Eventually, I reached the floor with the white crate, using the axe to open the door, smashing the latching mechanism with the pointed pick end.

"Already glad I grabbed you," I said, mumbling as I hefted the worn tool and pushed the door open.

I stepped into the new floor and was once again partially blinded. While the last floor had been lit up just enough through cracks and broken windows, this one was almost entirely open to the elements. The entire far corner was torn open, as well as a significant portion of the floor... and the floor below. I crept closer to the ragged edge and saw that a massive chunk of the building had

collapsed to the street, the concrete, steel, and rebar structure exposed. I looked around, orienting myself in the right direction with the map before finally spotting it.

Out on a steel support beam, hanging over the edge by ten feet or so, was a small white briefcase.

Cursing to myself, I slowly made my way around the destroyed office, making sure not to get too close to the broken edge and keeping an eye out for any sagging or worrying sounds. Eventually, I got relatively close to the outcropping beam.

Slowly but surely, I made my way to the box, the floor holding my weight pretty well. Small chunks of concrete and debris fell from the edges of the floor that had collapsed away, tumbling down to the rubble below. I stopped and waited, my foot just touching the metal beam's exposed surface. When nothing else shifted I kept shuffling forward, trying my best not to jostle anything.

The beam seemed to be stable as I slowly made my way to the briefcase, doing my best to ignore the absolutely lethal fall below me. I slowly slid further, taking my time before bending down slightly and reaching for the briefcase handle, not wanting to get too off-center in the process.

My fingers brushed the handle before reaching a bit further and snagging it. I resisted the urge to shout in triumph before starting to slide back along the beam. I was about halfway back when it shifted suddenly, bending down with a crumbling creak. I cursed, my eyes going wide as I just barely managed to stay upright. It shuddered again, and I turned to look, my eyes locking on to the now slightly visible underside of the beam.

It was caked with rust, the beam itself heavily corroded.

I turned on the spot and took a singular step before leaping off of the beam and back onto the solid floor. The steel support gave a screech of failing metal as it gave out and bent downwards at a

steep angle, which would have been impossible to stand on. I scrambled further away from the broken edge, stopping when I reached the wall ten feet away.

I sat there for a while, letting my heartbeat slow down to its normal level. I felt sick and clammy, but I was familiar enough with the after-effects of adrenaline at this point to know that I just needed to wait it out, taking deep, slow breaths.

Eventually, when I was fully recovered, I looked down at the white briefcase-like box, setting it down in my lap. I started looking around for a latch or something, but as I did, my projector beeped and blinked green, a similarly colored light turning on under the handle of the briefcase. I could hear a series of subtle, barely audible clicks before the briefcase opened with the hiss of a broken seal.

“Congratulations on-” The familiar voice of Ilbryen called out as I opened the box.

I cursed and slammed the box shut, looking around with wide eyes before standing and rushing to a nearby room. I quickly shut the door to the boring-looking office room behind me before putting the box on a desk and opening it again.

“Congratulations on finding found your first reward!” The recording of Ilbryen said, starting again. “Most of them will be harder, but you might find some that are easier! Either way, good luck, and happy hunting!”

I shook my head and pulled out the folded contents of the briefcase, flicking it open. It was some sort of jacket, made of some kind of artificial leather. The material was a dark black, and as I pulled it on, it settled comfortably, fitting me perfectly. It covered my entire torso and even seemed to roll and fold in a comfortable and precise way when I pulled up my sleeve to access my projector. I tapped it and saw it had a short description of the jacket.

Apparently, it was artificial leather and was mildly damage-proof. It wouldn't stop any bullets but would probably stop a knife and blunt the impact of anything more brutal. It was waterproof and reacted to heat and cold to keep me calm and warm when it needed to. It wasn't really armored, but it was a start.

It was also extremely comfortable and didn't restrict my movement at all.

I let out a long sigh, the fact that I had risked my life for a decent jacket settling into my brain. I shut the briefcase again, opening it a second later. When the message started playing again, I shut it quickly and shook my head before leaving it on the desk as I left the room, making my way back to the stairwell.

I needed to get out of this building.

Chapter Eleven

The stairwell down to the first floor was just barely traversable. Purple vines coiled around the handrails and covered most of the steps, with just enough space along the outer wall for me to slowly make my way down. I took around thirty minutes to reach the first floor, carefully stepping around the vines and occasionally skipping completely covered steps. As I descended, I was tempted by each door, the desire to take a peek inside, just to see if there was anything worthwhile, was strong, but I managed to ignore it.

Gathering supplies was important, but getting out of the city was even more important. Besides, there was no way of knowing if there would be anything exciting or worth taking in an office building. While there was no guarantee, I was much more likely to find food in a shop or even in someone's house. Grabbing any easy crates from my world would be the only exception.

When I got to the first floor, the door was already open, propped against the wall with a plastic door stopper, which itself was locked in place by a mess of purple tendrils. I stepped over them and into the bottom floor, slowly making my way through the building. I passed by a set of elevators, the doors broken and spread at an angle, vines the size of my head pushing them open. I carefully stepped around them, making my way into what had once been a front desk area.

I took a quick peek behind the desk, hoping that it had been some sort of security checkpoint, but all that was left was a broken-down computer, a basket full of pens, and other office supplies. I made my way across the mostly open room, looking around and trying to keep an eye on every corner, shadow, and obscured area while carefully avoiding the vines.

I wasn't sure why I was avoiding them strictly, but between the sweet smell and the off-putting meat-like interior, as well as the dried-out corpse from earlier, touching them just felt like a bad idea. I

managed to navigate the various coiled, hanging, and tangled vines to get to the main entrance. At one point, it had clearly been a set of rather large, mostly glass doors, a few feet taller than I was, matching the open design of the lobby. By now, however, they were shattered, leaving plenty of room for me to climb through.

So, of course, I didn't. Instead, I slowly stuck my head out and looked around. The street was mostly empty, with cars and vines everywhere. I pulled my head back in, rolled up my sleeve, and looked at my map. I quickly zoomed and moved its focus around, double-checking that I needed to head northeast to get out of the city. I also noted the crates marked around me, including the green that was only a dozen or so buildings away and right on the path I was looking to take.

I took a deep breath, shook my head, and finally pushed it out of the doorway, looking up and down the street. There were surprisingly few cars on the road, though plenty were parked along the street's sides. I had no idea what this meant, but it was interesting enough to catch my attention. Once I was as sure as I could be that I wasn't about to be ambushed, I stepped through the broken door, putting my hand up to block some of the sunlight.

I oriented myself in the right direction and started walking, only to stop immediately. The sidewalk was choked by the worrying, off-putting vines, enough that I would have to take it real slow to make sure I didn't touch them. A quick check showed that while plenty of vines reached the road, I would be able to walk much easier there. Unfortunately, this would also make me an easy target for anyone who happened to look down the road.

Or I could get over it and walk on the vines.

After a few seconds of thinking it through, I decided that speed was most important at the moment. I stepped carefully onto the street and started walking, already appreciating how much easier it was with fewer vines. After a few minutes of walking, I also realized that since I didn't have to keep my eyes constantly locked on the

ground, I would hopefully be able to spot any threats before they became a problem.

I was six or seven buildings away from the structure that held the green crate when I spotted a prize in the back of a car. The windows were broken, and its tires were flat and falling apart from dry rot. But there, sitting in the back seat, was a backpack.

It wasn't anything special, a simple, decent-sized black backpack with two main pockets, plus a few other smaller ones in the front and on both sides, though one seemed to be for a bottle. The material wasn't one I recognized, but that wasn't surprising, considering the time difference. I gently pulled it out of the car and went through it, pulling out some paper notepads, a hefty book, and a water-logged device, slightly bigger than the book but much thinner. Some mold was growing inside the bag, but I used some of the paper from a notebook to scrape it off. I would have to wash it out later.

I left the device, which I think was some sort of computer if the full-sized keyboard was anything to go by. I put it on the car's roof, stacking it next to the books. I kept the notepads, as the paper might be handy to start a fire... or as an emergency bathroom aid. I threw the pack over my shoulder and spent the next few minutes praying that it wouldn't come to that.

I made my way down the street, crossing through a few intersections and inspecting most of the cars I walked by. Eventually, after another twenty minutes of careful walking, I stood in front of the building my map told me contained a green crate.

It was a standard, non-moving parking structure that was overrun with vines. They were woven through the upper layers, coming down and around the concrete supports. Several vines thicker than my torso disappeared into the ground, while even more broke through windows and even the solid concrete that the structure was made of. However, the entrance down to the lower parking levels was almost completely clear.

I looked up into the sky, checking where the sun was, wanting to know how much sunlight I had left. Assuming that everything worked the same here as at home, I had most of the day ahead of me. Still, I absolutely did not want to be in the city when the sun eventually set. On the other hand... I needed equipment. Every single reward that I managed to get my hands on made it just a bit more likely that I would make it home. I would have liked to have gathered a few more white crates before attempting it, but a green reward crate shouldn't be much more difficult...

Right?

I took a deep breath and rolled up my sleeve, touching the metallic triangle and activating the projector's flashlight mode before slowly making my way down the ramp. According to my map, the reward was just two, maybe three floors under this one.

I stepped into the parking structure, immediately noting that the floor was surprisingly clear. I made my way deeper, keenly aware that every step I took further into the structure meant less and less light reached me from the entrance. About forty feet from the ramp, my projector was the only source of light I could detect. I walked further in, swinging my arm around as I tried to find a staircase, my projector lighting up a worryingly small amount of space. I added finding a good flashlight or twelve to my priority list.

I was shocked by the relative lack of cars in the structure. There were some, and they were all in really good shape compared to the rusted-out wrecks along the street, but nowhere as many as I would imagine. I was halfway tempted to try and see if I could get one started, but even with my skills as a mechanic, I had no idea how these cars worked. I knew that at home, around this time period, cars ran on fuel, usually biofuel, but I didn't know the first thing about those kinds of vehicles other than the fact that they existed. Besides, if there was one thing I learned from the shop that I knew would apply here, it's that just because a car looks good doesn't mean its insides are good.

By the time I had mentally confirmed I wasn't even going to pop the hoods on any of these cars, I finally spotted the emergency staircase. Unfortunately, it was completely blocked off by vines, meaning the only way down was the ramp at the far end of the underground parking lot. I set off directly for it, walking down the inclined path to the second level. When I finally reached the entrance, I froze, my eyes wide.

While the floor was still surprisingly clear, the walls of the structure were covered entirely in gigantic vines. Or maybe it was just one incredibly thick vine running along each side. The bulges along the purple surface were stranger, as they were mostly uniform in shape and shape, covering the wall completely. Even as I examined the vine-covered walls, I kept walking, heading ramp down to the third floor. A quick check told me the stairwell was still completely blocked off again, forcing me to walk down the long way.

I got down to the third floor and stopped again, panning my flashlight along the walls, finding even more strange bulging vines. I kept playing the light over the ground, eventually catching a shine from something. Squinting, I moved my arm back, finally locking onto a suitcase-sized crate just a few feet from the next ramp going down.

Biting back a happy laugh, I kept scanning the room, looking for anything in the way, anything I was in danger from. The longer I looked and found nothing, the lower my stomach sank. The first thing I found had been precariously placed on a steel beam and had almost killed me. If green was supposed to be more dangerous, then why the hell wasn't there anything here?

I slowly crept forward, keeping my eyes peeled as I scanned around the parking spaces, the occasional car, and concrete pillar keeping me from seeing everything. Eventually, about fifteen meters from the crate, the vines on the floor became thicker and denser. It went from being almost completely clear to a woven mess of purple and red vines.

If I wanted proof that touching the perturbingly colored vines was dangerous, here it was.

I scanned the floor, trying to find a path I could take. There were empty spaces dotted along the floor, but they were spread far enough apart that I wasn't sure I could make it to each one. I put the axe on the ground, leaning it against a car bumper before taking a closer look, trying to judge the distance between each space. It seemed like every single one was just far enough away that I would have to jump just a bit to get to it.

I chewed my lip and considered for a moment that I should just head back upstairs and get out of the city. While I would need these rewards if I wanted any chance to survive, no individual one was worth dying for. Still, none of them would be easy, I knew that much. Ilbryen and his company weren't in it to make my life easy. They were in it for entertainment, which meant putting me in real danger.

I let out a soft sigh, making up my mind and stepping closer to the web of vines, picking out the path I wanted to take and getting ready, counting down from five.

When I reached zero, I sprang forward, landing on the first stop and managing to keep my balance. I took another breath and leaped forward again, then again, and again. I was forced to jump sideways a few times, but eventually, I made the last jump. Unfortunately, I slipped, my center of gravity just off enough that I started falling forward.

Desperately I reached for the crate, managing to get myself to slam into it, hammering my ribs with the edge of the box, but just managing to keep myself from hitting the mat of vines under me. I bit my lip, holding back a pained groan as I held myself up, my body already straining at the poor angle. I looked down and pulled up my leg, finding a spot that was just big enough to settle my foot on it, managing to work and push until I was standing up straight.

I stood there in the pitch black, my breathing heavy from the strain of holding myself upright at a strange angle and from the adrenaline thundering through my veins. I looked back at the last jump before looking back to the small crate I had managed to make my way to. I shook my head and brought my arm closer to the box. A soft beep came from my triangle implant, and the box clicked as it unlocked.

I quickly opened it, ready to slam it shut if it started making noise. I let out a soft breath of relief when it was silent save a soft hiss of a broken seal. Inside, nestled in protective foam, was a singular device, a disk about a foot wide and six inches thick at the center, tapering off to the edge. Four cylinders were also set into the disk, exposed around the edge but tapered into the thicker center.

I was tempted to try and figure out what it was right then and there, but where I was caught up to me when my projector shut off, leaving me in perfect darkness save the soft green light coming from the crate. I turned the projector on and turned back to the overgrown vines. I took a deep breath and started working my way back to the other side, this time managing to keep it together long enough to clear the woven mess before stumbling and falling, rolling over onto my back.

I took a minute to recover before picking myself back up, sliding the disk into my backpack, grabbing my axe, and slinging my pack onto my back. I slowly made my way back up, fighting against the urge to rush and run back into the sunlight.

I got about halfway through the second layer of parking when a distant rumble resonated through the structure. I froze, focusing for a second, just able to make out the muffled crashing sounds, even as I could feel tremors through my feet. Realizing I was feeling something rather significant collapsing not too far away, I took a single step forward, preparing to rush to the surface, only to freeze again. All around me, just as the rumble started to peter out, the vines pulsed, throbbing as if suddenly awakened. The bulges- no, pods that lined the walls pulsed as well, distorting in shape as if...

Something was inside them, moving around.

I cursed and started to run, desperate to get clear of the parking structure. I jogged up the ramp into the sunlight, blocking the sun and looking around. In the distance, not nearly as far as I had assumed, I could see a cloud of dust and debris kicked up into the air by whatever had collapsed.

I could also see someone running at me, jogging closer and closer. She didn't notice me until she was running down the same street I was on, jumping in surprise when she did. She never stopped running, though. As she got closer, she looked at me like I was crazy.

"Didn't you hear that?!" She called out, jogging past, looking over her shoulder now. "C'mon! You need to run! There is no way the hivers didn't feel that!"

Chapter Twelve

Before my brain could connect whatever the hell was inside of those pods to what she was shouting about, I was already following behind her. I turned back to watch dozens of bipedal creatures, ones that looked just like the corpse I had pulled my axe out of, stumbled and ran out of the parking garage entrance. Thankfully they didn't all immediately make a beeline for us. Instead, they spread out, some running after us, but most of them breaking off to run in other directions. The woman running ahead of me cursed and started to run faster.

We ran down street after street, hopefully following a path that she knew because I had no idea where we were going. We also cut down a few alleys, even across the collapsed husk of a larger building. As we ran, I wondered just how much the dunk in the green Vita-Gel had changed me. I had always been in decent shape, but this was much further than I had ever run at once. I could feel the fatigue building up, but it wasn't nearly as acute as I would have expected.

As we took another shortcut through a building, five of the purple creatures almost ran into us. For a moment, I considered hefting my ax and trying to fight them off, but when the native woman just turned and kept running in a slightly different direction. I followed her, not wanting to lose my guide out of the city.

The creatures kept chasing us for a while, though they didn't seem nearly as fast or as smart as us. Suddenly the woman turned down an alley and jumped a metal-linked fence, climbing up over a dumpster to reach the top and crawl over it. I followed behind, almost cutting myself on the rusty fence as I just managed to clear it. The woman didn't even slow down when I stumbled on the other side, not that I could blame her.

As we kept on moving, the run slowly turned into a jog, the woman still looking around, clearly worried about more of the purple

humanoids showing up. She also kept her eye on me, clearly not liking that I was still there. I tried to look as peaceful as possible, keeping my distance as I followed.

Eventually, the buildings got short and smaller, the city thinning out considerably over what seemed like a mile. Better yet, the vines were getting smaller and smaller until they stopped altogether. By now, I was sweating profusely, my legs burning as I focused on keeping up. While I wasn't close enough to see if she was struggling as much as me, I could tell she was at least starting to get tired.

Finally, after another few dozen blocks, she stopped running, leaning her back against a seemingly random tree and sliding down to the ground. She kept her eyes locked onto me as I just dropped, laying down on my back, my pack tossed to the side.

"Thank... You..." I managed to get out before focusing on my breathing.

It took a few minutes, but eventually, I sat back up, only to find the woman casually pointing some sort of pistol in my vague direction. It was a weathered black, with a cylinder above the trigger. When she saw me sitting up she tensed, making sure the barrel of her gun was trained right on me.

"Why did you follow me?" She demanded.

"You told me to run, so I ran," I explained, my eyes locked on her pistol, my arms out to show my hands were empty. "You seemed to know where you were going, so I followed you."

The woman looked at me, confusion clear on her face. After a long pause, she lowered her gun but kept it in her hand.

"Did you not hear the building fall?" She asked skeptically. "I wasn't that far away from you. You must have heard it."

“Well, I was two floors down in the parking structure, but-”

“You were underground?!” She asked, her eyes wide. “And I thought I was crazy scaving in the city, but you actually went underground?”

“I’m... not from around here,” I explained.

“Really? Not from around here? I’d like to know where exactly you were where you hadn’t heard of a hive city... Sounds like a nice place.”

“Pretty far...” I answered vaguely.

“You’re serious, aren’t you? You don’t-” She stopped and shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. Word of advice then, hive vines are much more sensitive where their pods are, so basically anywhere underground big enough for a few people.”

“Thanks...” I said, getting a shrug in return. “So those things that were chasing us...?”

“Hivers. They grow them in pods underground,” She answered. “You’re lucky you got out in time. They would have cornered you pretty quickly underground.”

“We outran them pretty easily.”

“Yeah, ‘cause they are slow as hell. They don’t chase you down. They pin you, then you can’t kill ‘em fast enough to escape.”

“Right... Well, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She said, standing up and sliding the pistol back into the holster on her right hip.

Wordlessly she grabbed a rock from the ground next to her and turned back to the tree, looking up into the branches. Without a gun aimed at me, I had a chance to really look at her. She had light

brown hair, cut short in a crude pixie cut. Her face was sharp, made more so by the cutting looks she had been sending my way. She was dressed in a sleek teal-green jacket with a worn black undershirt, with a belt on her hips that held a series of bullets on her left hip, all neatly in a row and partially hidden by her jacket. She was wearing brown combat boots of some kind, as well as a pair of utilitarian black-gray pants with a few pockets. Her belt had a canteen attached to one hip and some sort of tool pouch on the other. On the hip and leg opposite her pistol was a worn machete clipped into a plastic sheath.

I watched as she took aim and threw her rock up into a tree, holding her hands out to catch the backpack that fell out of it. She swung it around her back, snaking her arm through and getting it settled before turning back to me.

“Well... good luck!” She said before turning around and walking away.

I watched her walk away for a few seconds, heading across the run-down, mostly overgrown road, remembering what Ilbryen had said. If fleeing the city like that had meant anything, it was that I didn't know anything about Alt-Earth. Finding someone to stick with could be incredibly helpful.

I needed a guide.

“Hey, wait!” I called out, grabbing my axe and backpack and following after her.

She continued walking, ignoring me as I rushed to keep up, stepping around chunks of busted sidewalk before stepping onto the road.

“Look, I don't know much about this area,” I explained, walking alongside her.

“Obviously.” She said, not slowing down but also not trying to run away, which I took as a good sign.

“Right, well... Look, I’m on a bit of a... mission of sorts,” I said, trying to explain the situation in a way that didn’t make me seem insane. “From.. well, really far away.”

“And that brought you to a hive city?” She asked, raising an eyebrow. “It’s a fucking miracle you didn’t get torn to pieces the second you stepped into it. How did you know to avoid the vines?”

“The... The smell convinced me they were dangerous,” I explained. “Anything that smells that sweet wants to be eaten. That and the fact that it looked like....”

“Like meat with purple bark?” She finished, and I nodded in confirmation. “Good instincts.”

We kept walking for a while, with me going wherever she had in mind. I desperately tried to think of a plausible explanation when she turned to me slightly.

“So what kind of mission?”

“Exploration, survival,” I answered. “And recovering.... Lost tech caches.”

“Lost tech...” She stopped, looking at me blankly before letting out a sigh. “Right, I got it. You’re fucking crazy. Great.”

She turned and kept walking, picking her pace like she was preparing to run away.

“Wait, no, I can prove it,” I said. “Look, I have this. It shows me where the caches are.”

I rolled up my sleeve and tapped my implanted projector, which lit up and showed off the map. There were a few boxes around

where we were, but the concentration was much lighter than it had been in the city.

The woman turned around, doing a double take with wide eyes, when she saw the holo-projected map.

“What the... What the hell is that?” She asked, stepping closer to examine the map. “This... this map isn’t old. It shows things how they are now. How are you projecting it from your arm?”

“It’s an implant,” I explained with a shrug, adjusting my grip on my axe.

“And... this stuff is common where you are from?”

“Common enough.”

She studied my face for a long moment before finally letting out a sigh.

“Alright. What do you want from me?” She asked.

“I need a guide,” I explained. “There’s obviously a lot I don’t know, and I’m getting the feeling that is a good way to end up dead.”

“If you’re lucky.” She responded, shaking her head. “But lugging around someone who can’t pull their own weight is a good way to get dead too. What’s in it for me?”

“I’m a quick study. Plus, I can share some of the tech I find,” I offered. “Not all of it because some of it won’t work for you, and I need some as well, but just a few things could make surviving in this hell hole a lot easier.”

This was the most dangerous part of the idea, for obvious reasons. I had no way of knowing what kind of person she was. She was just as likely to help or slit my throat when I slept. But if I was the one who could lead her to powerful equipment, she would need me to survive in order to use me. And at some point, if I decided I

was set up enough to not need her anymore, I could always just disappear.

“What kind of tech?” She asked, looking me up and down. “No offense, but your kit is... well, I’d say basic, but that’s overstating it.”

“I know, I don’t have much. I’m just starting out.”

“You barely have anything,” She corrected. “Especially since the pack looks empty. The axe isn’t a bad choice if you have the strength to swing it around. What’s in the bag?”

“Notebook and something I found in a cache. I don’t know what it is yet, though. The crates I find this stuff in don’t come pre-labeled,” I explained, kneeling to grab the disk from my bag. “But once I have some time, I can do this....”

I brought the disc-like piece of equipment up to my arm, my implant letting out a small ding. A short description of the drone, which is what it turned out to be, was projected into the air, along with a small video showing what it could do. Apparently, it was a light drone. It could cast light in various ways, such as lighting up an area, as a simple beam, or even a distracting strobe. These different modes took different amounts of energy, which affected how long it could be on. A wide beam of modest amounts of light could stay on for three or four hours, while lighting up an entire area would drain it much quicker.

“Drone, medium brightness, tight cone, track line of sight,” I said aloud, the drone beeping and turning on, the edge of the disc glowing a pale purple as it pulled out of my hands.

The drone floated about a foot and a half above my shoulder and projected a cone of light out from one of the cylinders set into the disc. The light was just bright enough to be detectable in the afternoon sun. A three-hour timer appeared just above my projector, no bigger than my thumb.

The entire time I was reading and figuring out how to work the drone, the still-unnamed woman watched me closely. Her eyes went wide when it started flying, watching its projected light as it moved to follow where I was looking.

“... So lost technology, huh?” She asked, eyes locked on the drone. “Would that one work for me?”

“Uh... I think it’s using some of my implants, but...” I explained before looking up at the drone and pointing to the woman. “Follow her and track her line of sight.”

The drone floated away from me and stationed itself above her shoulder, the light following where she looked with barely any delay. I called it back a few seconds later, deactivating it to keep from wasting its charge. The instructions said it would recharge entirely overnight. Of course, I didn’t believe for a second that a drone of that size needed time to recharge anything, but I wasn’t surprised that Ilbryen’s company had worked in limitation to some of the handy tech.

“Alright... I’m interested now,” The woman said, watching as I slid the drone into my bag. “On a scale of one to ten, how impressive was that? Is that the coolest thing on your list, or was it lame?”

“Uh... probably a four? Maybe three and a half?” I admitted. “I found this in a level two cache. It goes up to level four. But there isn’t a way to tell what’s inside the crate, box, or whatever.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that.” She said, turning and looking up at the still, mostly clear sky.

The overgrown road was quiet for a long moment as she thought to herself, leaving me awkwardly waiting in silence. After a full minute, she turned back to me and nodded.

“Alright, I’ll bite. If you give me some useful stuff here and there, I’ll be your guide. But if this turns out to be some bullshit thing, I’ll cut you without blinking, got it?”

I nodded, reaching out my hand. After a moment of looking at it, she reached out and shook it.

“My name’s Leon, by the way,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Tessa,” She responded. “And let’s hope it stays nice knowing you.”

Chapter Thirteen

We spent the next few hours walking further and further away from the city. I explained as best I could what we could expect to discover from the crates, sticking to my original story of it being lost tech. I also added the lie that many of the more accessible crates had already been claimed, so the ones that were left were usually in dangerous positions and that it would probably scale for the more advanced caches. She seemed to buy it well enough. To be honest, I really didn't care if she fully believed me or not. We would both get what we wanted by the end of this, assuming she didn't turn out to be crazy.

The sun was starting to sink low when we arrived at our destination, five or six miles from the city. We trekked through a field, stopping along one of the edges next to a broken-down structure with half-rotted and weather-worn numbers clipped to it. It took me a minute to figure out it was a manual scoreboard. Tessa looked around before stepping off the field and into the brush. I followed behind, finding a thin, barely noticeable path into the dense trees surrounding the overgrown field.

I pushed some branches away as I followed my new guide, stopping when I realized what she was leading me to.

There, in the middle of the woods, was a large armored vehicle of some kind. There was no turret on top, so it wasn't a tank, but it was clearly armored and reinforced. It had three large tires on each side, all of them flat and falling apart. The vehicle itself seemed to be mostly intact, with only a few rust spots breaking through its brown paint. I could also see a gray contraption on the roof, with a hose running along the vehicle through a small hole.

"This thing is one of the only reasons I'm still alive out here," She explained, pulling herself up to the vehicle's roof after tossing her bag up. "If you keep moving, you can hide from the nocturnal mutants that come out at night. But once you settle down, you need

a sturdy structure to keep them out. The armor on this is thick enough to stop anything I've seen or heard of. Plus its smack dab in the middle of the quiet zone

"Nocturnal mutants?" I asked, looking around as Tessa unlocked a large hatch on the roof, opening it with a creak. "And what's the quiet zone?"

"Really? Damn, this is going to be a thing, isn't it?" She asked, looking down at me from the vehicle. "There's a lot of stuff that comes out at night. Daytime is dangerous, but only idiots walk around at night. The quiet zone is a chunk of land around the city. Hives and hivers are dangerous, so nothing wants to get close, including mutants."

"Is it safe to be so close?" I asked, looking around a bit.

"Safer than most places. The hive has stabilized, meaning it's not growing any more. But because it's relatively close by, the mutant population is much lower than normal. Now get up here before I lock you outside."

I climbed up the side of the vehicle, doing my best to keep it from looking like I was scrambling. By the time I got on top, Tessa was already sliding down inside through the hatch. I looked around, scanning the area before climbing down, carefully carrying my axe as I did.

Inside was surprisingly spacious and clearly customized. I had expected a cramped interior filled with electronics and other stuff. Instead, Tessa had clearly spent some time clearing everything not functional out, including where the driver's seats would have been, which was replaced by a bed. Along the back half of the space were shelves, boxes, and crates with a space between them to move. There was also a small table and two chairs set up, as well as a metal box, some sort of fireplace judging by the chimney coming from the top.

“Impressive,” I said, still looking around. “Did you do all this?”

“Of course, can’t exactly call the handyman to put up some shelves, can I?” She said, shaking her head.

“Right...”

As we talked, Tessa was unloading her backpack. A few cans and boxes of food, two sealed bottles of water, and a few more packs of something that I didn’t recognize. When she was done, she dug through a crate and pulled out a worn metal cup, pouring me a cup of water from her canteen. She put the cup on the table and sat down, hunching over as she moved.

“So, let’s see your map,” She said, gesturing to the small seat on the other side of the table.

I nodded and sat down, bending over to move as well. It was cramped, but I guess that was a small price for safety. I took the cup and drank from it before rolling up my jacket sleeve and showing off the map. I zoomed out as much as possible, showing her all of the crates that were in the area and showing up on the map. It was shocking just how few crates there were outside the city.

“We can’t go back into the city, not for a few days at least,” Tessa said when I pointed that out. “The hivers patrol for a while and a big collapse like that will send out vibrations as it settles.”

The map had three purples dotted around, but thankfully none of them were near us. When Tessa saw the second furthest one, she laughed and shook her head.

“That one is in the middle of a visper nest,” She explained, shaking her head. “If that’s what kind of danger stopped your people from grabbing a purple crate, then that color isn’t worth going for. There are better ways to kill ourselves.”

“What the hell is a visper?”

“It’s a snake about forty feet long that can blend into the foliage like a chameleon. They whisper quiet, hence the name. Whisper... viper. Visper”

“Holy fuck.... Yeah, I’m all for staying away from them for now.”

“For now?! Leon, if you think I’m up for fighting a couple of forty-foot invisible snakes just cause it might have a fancy toaster hidden in its nest, then maybe you should just leave.”

“I think you’re underestimating the tech we will be finding,” I responded. “But that’s fine. You’ll change your mind eventually.”

The Alt-Earth native just scoffed and leaned back in her seat, looking at my map. Eventually, she nodded and leaned forward.

“There is a green nearby, maybe a two-hour walk from here,” She pointed out. “It’s in the middle of a school. There shouldn’t be anything overly dangerous in that area, though I don’t know what’s in the school, I’ve never been. We will go there tomorrow, and you can prove that this is worth my time.”

The rest of the night was spent in relatively awkward silence. Tessa eventually pulled out a book, one with a scuffed and torn cover, reading in her bed as the sun went down and the sky went dark. Unfortunately, it got equally dark in the APC, which Tessa explained meant Armored Personnel Carrier, which I figured was the equivalent of an Android Deployment Vehicle from my world.

Eventually, Tessa and I shared a meal of canned beans and some brick meat sealed in a can, the interior of the APC lit up by the lighting drone. It wasn’t all that bad, really, a bit salty, but leagues above the ration bars mom and I had to sometimes live off of when money was particularly tight. It tasted even better after realizing that none of my family would ever have to worry about that again.

“What are you smiling about?” Tessa asked. “I know this isn’t good enough to be smiling about.”

“Could be worse,” I said with a shrug. “Thank you for sharing, by the way.”

“Whatever. We will need to find more food when we are out. I’m still running low from winter.”

After we were done eating and cleaning up from dinner and I turned off the lighting drone, leaving us in pitch black darkness. I offered to turn it back on and she turned it down.

“No point, really. We may as well head to bed,” She said. “There’s a spare blanket tucked up in that box, use it as a mattress or whatever. You don’t seem like that kind of guy, but just in case you get any funny ideas, the last guy who tried was a eunuch for the last five or six seconds of his life.”

With that, she got into bed, turning away and pulling the covers over herself. I was left in the dark, wondering if she was serious or not.

I pulled the blanket she had mentioned out of storage, fumbling a bit in the extremely low light. I unrolled it and laid it on the floor, setting up a makeshift bed in the walking space in her storage area. Thankfully I had the idea to pull off my jacket to use as a pillow. I fell asleep almost immediately, finishing a day that started in one dimension and ended in another.

I woke up the following day to the sound of Tessa crawling out of the APC, turning just in time to watch her legs disappear through the hatch. I quickly put my jacket on and rolled up the blanket, putting it back where I got it before heading to the hatch.

“Uh... Tessa?” I called out quietly.

“I’m not abandoning you, Leon, I’m boiling water for later,” She explained with a tired sigh, calling back in from somewhere

outside. “There is a breakfast bar on the table. Eat that, grab a canteen from one of the shelves, and get out here.”

I nodded and sat down, wolfing down the breakfast bar. I spent a minute looking for the canteen before grabbing my bag and climbing outside. The morning air was cool and damp, just cold enough that I could see my breath as I dropped down the side of the large armored vehicle. The small saplings and weeds that grew through the underbrush of the wooded area were damp with dew. I hefted my axe as I scanned the area, already on edge. I had no idea what was out there, and I wasn’t excited to find out.

“Relax,” Tessa said, jolting me out of my tense looks. “Mornings are pretty calm.”

“Really? That seems kind of... arbitrary.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” She responded with a shrug. “Everyone knows that mornings are calm.”

Tessa held out her hand, and I passed her the canteen. She walked around the APC, and I followed her until she stopped by a makeshift stove, a giant metal pot tarnished by frequent heating, resting on top. The brunette survivor tapped the spigot set into the side of the metal pot and filled my canteen with steaming water, passing it back to me and repeating the process with her own. As I screwed the cap onto mine, she stuffed a few leaves from a bundle hanging nearby into her still-steaming container before attaching her cap. When she caught me staring, she shrugged.

“Couple leaves of mint. Better than drinking it plain,” She explained. “You ready to go?”

“No, but let’s go anyway,” I said.

She nodded, sniffed, and turned away from me, snagging her pack and hefting it over her shoulder, wordlessly walking away. I watched her walk for a few seconds before following behind her. As I did, I tapped my arm, checking out my map.

“It’s a bit more north,” I said, reorienting the map in my direction.

“I know. But I want to clear a few houses this way,” She explained. “We need food. Well, I need food, and you aren’t mooching off me.”

We walked for about twenty minutes, passing through the remnants of a broken-down town. The level of overgrowth varied greatly from one part of the town to another, with large patches massively overgrown with thick, strange plants and trees that didn’t match any of the surrounding areas. I spoke up as we passed by a store, some sort of fuel station convenience store combination.

“So why aren’t we stopping here?” I asked, looking at the long shattered front windows of the shop.

“I’ve been living off this town for almost three years now,” She explained. “I’ve gone through most of the obvious places.”

“Oh... You eat that much, huh?” I asked, getting a glare back.

“Funny. I trade a lot of what I find back to... well, back to some other people that live nearby.”

The change in her voice was drastic enough that I immediately picked up on it. Deciding to take it easy for now, I let the conversation trail off as she led the way through the town. Eventually, we stopped in front of a few homes with overgrown yards and decaying exteriors. A few of them had cars falling apart in the driveway.

I was beginning to see that while this Earth was technologically behind mine by a considerable degree, the people here were much wealthier. Almost every home I saw was big enough to dwarf my apartment. I wondered if the suburbs of my Earth were like this or if the nobles somehow took that away as well.

“You coming?” She asked, standing in the broken and crumbling front walk of the nearest house. “Having a source of light inside would be pretty good until the sun is a little higher.”

I picked up the pace and followed behind her before reaching into my bag and pulling out the drone, giving it a quick order to keep us both lit up dimly, wanting to save some charge for later. The drone floated between us and surrounded us with a faint glow that would be helpful inside.

We stepped into the first house, and I was hit by a wave of mildew, mold, and dampness. Tessa just shook her head and stepped in further.

“I’ll get the second floor. You get first,” She said, already climbing the stairs to the second floor. “Don’t pack anything away, just take it out and carry it to a table or counter or something.”

I watched her disappear to the second floor, her boots the last thing I could see. I let out a long sigh.

“And I thought community gangers were intense,” I mumbled, shaking off the trepidation.

I looked around the entrance into the house, noting the thick layer of dust, broken windows, and half-rotted carpet. I could hear Tessa walking around on the second floor, the ceiling creaking and occasionally cracking loud enough that she would pause for a moment before continuing. With a shrug, I turned and headed into a decent-sized kitchen. I gave the table a shove, making sure it was stable before leaning my axe against the wall next to one of the kitchen entrances and heading to the cabinets.

Time to get to work.

Chapter Fourteen

I spent fifteen minutes clearing out the cabinets and shelves of the kitchen. I made the mistake of opening the fridge about five minutes in, almost throwing up when the absolute ungodly stench of sealed rot hit my nose. It seemed like one giant colony of mold, which all my senses were disgusted by. I quickly shut the fridge, taking a minute to recover from the ordeal. I could hear a knowing laugh coming from upstairs.

I found plenty of molds and rot in the cabinets as well, but something about being unsealed and more open to the elements meant that a lot of the boxes of food and other things were just dirt or desiccated to the point it was one stiff breeze away from being dust. It made me wonder just how long ago the world ended. I knew canned and preserved food could last hundreds of years in my world, but this world was behind ours by a few hundred years... had they improved their canning already?

I grabbed everything that was canned or sealed and put it on the table, only finding a few cans of tomatoes before figuring out that a door next to the fridge led to a small pantry. It was mostly empty of anything useful but did have a can of tuna fish, two cans of peaches, and two different types of beans. After I was sure I had found anything worthwhile, I moved on from the kitchen and explored the rest of the first floor. There was a media room of some sort, filled with falling-apart furniture and old electronics, covered in dust and chunks of material from the ceiling.

I circled around through the next room, once again not finding anything worth grabbing. It was a dining room, one with more space than the simple table in the kitchen, with a cabinet of fancy-looking plates in one corner. I walked back into the kitchen when I noticed a closed door. I opened it slowly, ready to slam it closed again if something came running up.

“Float down there,” I said to the drone, who was still following me around.

Soundlessly the disc-shaped drone floated down, lighting up the basement completely. There was a lot of dust down here, even more than the rest of the house had. But it seemed undisturbed. Taking a deep breath, I started walking down the stairs, testing each step as I went. They creaked loudly, nails and wood making too much noise after spending so long unused.

I spent another five minutes opening up cabinets and looking around in the basement, not wanting to miss anything but also not wanting to be down there for much longer. When I was done looking around, I headed back up, closing the door behind me and stepping around the corner into the main hallway, only to freeze in shock.

At the other end of the hall were three four-legged abominations. They were as big as your average dog mutt, with spikey matted fur and long pulled-back ears. Their teeth were long and dangerous looking, with four massive fangs dripping with drool. To top it all off, each of them had two tails, which whipped around and were clearly barbed, a glint of white bone poking from the end. They looked like the nightmare versions of a black house cat that ate stims and steroids for breakfast. All three of them locked eyes with me at the same time.

We stared at each other for what felt like minutes, frozen as we waited for the other to act. I glanced at the kitchen entrance, and the pause broke.

All four of us exploded into movement at the same time. I crossed the hall into the kitchen, grabbed the axe, and spun around. I moved just in time for the first bastard to come around the corner, yowling and screeching at me in a way that hurt my ears. Its head swiveled to find me, its whole body coiling to attack, but I stepped forward and buried my axe in its skull. The mutant abomination went down without another noise, dead in an instant.

I managed to pull my axe free, just in time to take a step back as the second feline horror leapt at me. I raised my arm instinctively, the dog-sized feline mutant locking its jaws around my forearm. I could feel its teeth digging into my arm, but there was no pain beyond a few tiny pricks. It tried to bat at me with its claw-filled paws, but I held it away from myself.

I could see the third cat looking for an opening in the entrance into the kitchen, even as the one on my arm chewed on me, trying to tear into my flesh. Instinctively I let my axe slide down slightly in my one-handed grip, using the different position to slam the axe head into the bastard on my arm. Each strike was clearly weaker, but by the fourth smack, the abomination went limp. Unfortunately, its jaws were still locked on my arm.

I stumbled back, trying to pry my arm free even as the last feline stalked me. It must have seen an opening because suddenly, it threw itself at me, almost certainly going for my throat.

Only for Tessa to nearly cut its head off with a two-handed swing of her machete. The corpse of the beasts slammed into me still, knocking me back and onto my ass, my arm still getting dragged down by the broken and slightly twitching corpse of the second cat.

But the fight was over.

I sat for a long moment catching my breath, my adrenaline slowly dissipating, leaving me feeling clammy and tired.

“Not bad,” Tessa said as she eventually made her way over to me. “If you can take down two displacers by yourself, I feel a lot more confident in keeping you alive.”

She kneeled beside me and flicked out a smaller pocket knife, stabbing and cutting at the feline mutant still latched to my arm. It must have done something because suddenly, the jaw released me, letting her push the corpse to the side.

“Roll up your sleeve,” She instructed, taking off her pack and reaching inside as I did as she said. “You’re going to need something to keep that from getting infected. I don’t have anything, so we-”

She turned back with a roll of cloth, turning back to my exposed arm, stopping when she saw how little I was injured.

“What... It barely got you...”

She turned my arm over, looking at the six or seven tiny puncture wounds along my arm, only a few inches from my implant.

“My jacket is something I got from a tech pickup,” I explained. “It’s a lot more protective than it looks.”

“Yeah... I can tell. I’ve seen displacers chew through leather and slice the arm underneath all the way to the bone. You’re hardly even bleeding...” She observed, putting away her bandage. “Well, you’re still going to need something to keep that from getting infected.”

“No, I’m good there, too,” I said, shaking my head. “They didn’t want me getting sick while I was on my mission, so they gave me some treatments that keep me from catching anything, including infections. I heal a bit quicker too. These will be gone in a few days, maybe less.”

“...Holy shit, really?” She asked. “Just like that, no infections? Fucking hell. What’s the chance of me getting some of that?”

“We might stumble on a serum that does that,” I admitted, standing up with Tessa’s help. “But that’s going to be worth a lot. Serums are probably going to be rare.”

“Fair enough. Sounds like it would still be worth it, though.”

Together we dragged the mutated creatures outside, rolling them down the porch steps. When we were done, she looked me up

and down and shook her head.

“So why are they called displacers?” I asked as I closed the door behind us this time.

“I don’t know,” She answered with a shrug. “That’s what they have always been called, as long as I can remember.”

“Gotcha,” I responded simply.

“You need to change, by the way,” She explained as she made her way back into the kitchen. “You’re covered in blood and smell like a dinner bell to anything hungry. You can probably find some clothes upstairs if you’re lucky.”

“Dammit...”

I made my way upstairs and went through the three bedrooms that were there. I got lucky and found an intact pair of pants in the last room I checked and a pair of worn but perfectly intact boots in a closet. I quickly traded my pants for the scavenged pair, trading my belt over as well. When I was decent, I carried the footwear downstairs, stopping at the last step to sit down and put on my new steel-toed boots.

“Good idea.” She said, spotting my new footwear. “Did you check for scorpions?”

I jerked my head around to look at her, my eyes wide.

“Is that a thing?” I asked, definitely not panicking.

Tessa looked at me for a long few seconds as if to say, “of course, are you an idiot” before finally breaking down and laughing, shaking her head. The release of tension got to me, and I started laughing with her. When she recovered enough to talk, she continued.

“Of course, it’s not a thing, at least not this far north,” She assured me. “Besides, they wouldn’t fit in your boot anyway.”

My laugh cut off mid-chuckle with a squeak as she added that last bit, causing her to laugh again. When she finally recovered, she threw me something, which I barely managed to catch after bobbling it twice.

It was a leather sheath for a hefty, well-made knife. The sheath was worn but fully intact, which I was starting to understand was as good as new for scavenged stuff. I examined the blade, which turned out to be around six or seven inches, before pushing it back into the sheath, looking back to the Alt-Earth native.

“You need a knife. Plus, that one is big enough to use as a weapon when your axe is too big or slow,” She explained before turning and heading back into the kitchen.

I nodded in understanding, pulling off my belt to attach the knife to my hip. I followed Tessa into the kitchen when it was secure and oriented correctly. She separated most of the stuff I had found into two piles while adding what she had found into them.

“Alright, pick a pile and fill your bag. We have three other houses I want to check.”

I nodded and put everything into my bag before zipping it up and following her out of the house. We proceeded to loot all of the other homes, filling our bags with more canned food and a few bits and bobs that Tessa seemed to think were important. I did recognize the sowing kit that she seemed particularly happy to have found. She explained that thread tended to rot away in less-than-perfect conditions, so finding a whole one was useful.

While packing at the last house, I idly checked my map, scanning around before noticing something.

“Huh...” I said. “Tessa, there’s a low-level cache nearby. Like really nearby.”

She walked over and looked at the map as I held my arm out for her. She frowned slightly and looked up at me.

“How did you not notice that sooner? Is this the first time you’ve checked the map since we left?”

“I was a bit distracted,” I pointed out. “But you’re not entirely wrong. I should be checking it more often.”

We finished filling our packs, each of us carrying seven or eight cans of food and a few more items each, before leaving out the front door and walking towards the white dot on the map. Sure enough, just across the street was another home. Unlike the ones we just looted, however, this one was incredibly decayed, and half collapsed.

“So... let me guess... the stuff is on the top floor?” Tessa asked, looking up at the broken-down home.

“Yeah, looks like it,” I answered, checking the map one last time.

“Well... It’s a death trap, for sure... But we should still get it if it’s anything like your jacket.”

We stood for a long moment, just studying the crumbling structure. I sighed and took off my backpack, setting it on the ground with my axe.

“Let me know if it starts to collapse, and I can’t see it,” I said before slowly making my way up the porch stairs, avoiding a rotted board.

“Wait, are you sure?” She asked. “I’m lighter than you, I should go.”

“Yeah, but I heal faster than normal,” I reminded her. “If I fall and hurt myself I’ll be down for a week, you’ll be down for a month.”

“...Can’t argue with that. Good luck.”

I didn’t mention that sitting outside while someone else had the “fun” wasn’t exactly good entertainment.

I stepped into the house, the door having long since collapsed inward. Glass crunched under my boots as I slowly made my way deeper, heading to the rickety staircase, making sure to test each step carefully. I slowly climbed to the second floor, checking the top of the stairs to confirm there was still another floor.

I managed to find the staircase without any problems while also managing to avoid the weak sections of the floor. I almost screamed out when my foot went through one of the stairs, but I managed to bite my cheek and keep it in. I climbed higher and higher into a rotted and falling apart attic, almost completely exposed to the elements.

After a quick scan, I spotted the crate, this one even smaller than the briefcase I had found my jacket in. It was resting next to a rotted piece of old furniture, worryingly near where the most significant collapse of the structure was. I took one step closer to it and froze as the entire floor creaked.

“Fuck fuck fuck.” I half sang to myself, slowly moving back to the stairs.

I looked around for any options before reaching out and picking up some sort of ceramic vase next to the stairs. I wound up and hurled it towards the crate. The vase shattered against the floor but still nudged the container closer to the edge. With a smirk, I picked up more stuff and threw it, eventually knocking the crate down over the edge.

“Was that it?” Tessa called out. “Hold on, stop throwing shit. I think I can get to it....”

I smiled and started making my way back down the broken house, eager to see what we had gotten.

Chapter Fifteen

When I finally got back down, trying my best to only walk in places I had already tested while making my way up, Tessa was kneeling next to the white case. She was fiddling with it, clearly trying to open it, with no luck. I watched her for a long pause before walking down the last few steps of the porch.

“Didn’t I tell you? Only I can get them open.”

“Yeah yeah, I wanted to at least try,” She said, not a drop of shame in her voice as she passed me the box.

I accepted it and turned it over, finding the front and waving my implant over it, smiling at the now-familiar beep. The crate hissed and opened slightly, letting me grip the edge and pull it completely open. Inside was a pair of black gloves with a gray patch along the back of the hand that continued halfway up each finger. They looked like they were made from the same material as my jacket.

I pulled them out and brought them up to my arm, the projector showing off their description. They were basically the same gimmick as my jacket, just as gloves. I looked at them for a second before passing them to Tessa.

“Here,” I said. “They aren’t much, but it’s better than nothing.”

“What do they do?” She asked, hesitating for a moment before accepting them and putting one on. “I don’t really like gloves for-”

She stopped when she got the glove on, the material visibly shifting and reshaping to fit her hands perfectly. She flexed her hand, looking down at it in shock.

“Damn... That’s the most comfortable glove I have ever worn.”

“They are like my jacket,” I explained as she pulled on the other glove, watching it resize as well. “Comfortable, really tough, impact-absorbing, heat resistant, and insulated. Keeps you cool when it’s hot and warm when it’s cold. Nothing special, just a pair of really, really, *really* good gloves.”

Tessa nodded as I explained, still flexing and testing the gloves. She quickly stood straight and pulled out her machete, taking a few hard swings with it. With a nod, she clipped it back into her quick draw sheath, pulling out her pistol next. She carefully unloaded it, pushing the cylinder out the side of the gun, tapping out six bullets, just like she had on her belt. She then spent the next five minutes practicing her reloading. When she was satisfied that the gloves weren’t making it any harder, she loaded the pistol one last time, tucking it back into its holster.

“They are a good pair of gloves. Thanks.”

We spent ten minutes taking a break, drinking from our warm canteens. By now, the sun was high in the sky, and the morning chill had long since burned off. It was still pleasant, with a slight breeze running through the trees and overgrown lawns.

“Alright, let’s stash these packs, and we can head off to the school,” Tessa said, stretching a bit. “The sooner we do this, the sooner we can get back to the APC.”

I nodded and stood, stretching a bit before pulling up the map. After a few minutes of looking at it, we set out, following the broken and cracked roads. It was an hour-long walk until we arrived at the mostly intact structure. It stood out from the surrounding fields, which were surprisingly not overgrown. We stopped by a nearby house, crouching behind a line of fence.

“Alright, so I’ve never been in here before,” Tessa admitted, talking in hushed whispers. “But I’m not seeing signs of anything... well, I won’t jinx it.”

As she talked, I mentally reviewed what I knew about the difficulty levels so far. My first green was from the underground parking structure, which according to Tessa, was a considerable risk, but one that would have required me fucking up. As long as I kept quiet and didn't agitate the vines, I would have been fine. The building collapse is what screwed me. The two white rewards have both been traversing dangerous locations. I could take my time, come up with a plan and, if I was smart, come up with a way to cheat the challenge. The only other thing I had to compare it to was the purple crate Tessa said was in a visper nest.

If the pattern continued, this crate would be dangerous, but the danger would be avoidable or not instantly lethal as long as I was lucky or skilled.

No pressure, then.

"We are going to have to wing it," I said. "We know where the crate is. We just have to sneak in and sneak out."

"Right, fair enough," She responded, standing up and peaking around the corner, checking up and down the streets. "Stay close, don't touch anything, be careful where you walk and don't be an idiot."

I nodded and followed her as she stepped around the corner, both of us heading straight for the school. It was a one-story brick building that was spread over a surprisingly large campus. The bricks were dark from grime and dirt, while almost every single window in the entire structure was broken. We made our way through the overgrown lawn surrounding the school, stopping once we were crouched under a shattered window.

Tessa looked at me, and I gave her a thumbs up, the Alt-Earth native nodding before starting to carefully remove the glass shards from the window we were under. Eventually, when the

window was cleared, she stood and hopped in, jumping up and over the sill. When she was clear, I stood and followed her inside.

We entered a long hallway with doors and lockers along the opposite wall. It had the same musty, moldy, damp smell that all the houses we had cleared today had. As Tessa made her way to the nearest door, I kept my eyes on both sides of the hallway, my axe ready.

After a minute or so of peaking around doors and walking down halls, Tessa turned and tapped her arm, looking at me expectantly. Nodding, I rolled up my sleeve and showed off the implant, tapping it awake so we could look at it. After a quick look, I deactivated the projector, and we started walking down the hall, making our way around the corner, pausing to slowly peek down the next hallway.

When nothing immediately jumped out at us, we continued, slowly making our way over collapsed ceiling tiles, rusted lockers, and broken glass. We kept our eyes peeled, checking every room to ensure there weren't any surprises as we moved forward. We got closer and closer to the cache, finally stopping at a series of double doors.

"Okay, looks like the cache is in the gym. Ready to take a look?" Tessa asked in a whisper, and I nodded.

She opened the door slowly, just enough for us to peek inside. The gym roof had almost completely collapsed, though the walls remained relatively intact. All of the material from the collapsed roof, as well as random junk from outside, were gathered together into a mound, and on top of that was a pile of sticks, organized in a general pattern that my brain took a long moment to recognize. It was an absolutely massive nest, probably about three or four meters wide. I had just enough time to spot a clutch of eggs, each the size of a large watermelon, as well as a small corner of green among them, before Tessa pulled me back.

“Holy shit, that’s a roc nest,” Tessa said, looking down the hallway. “I knew one was around the area, but with the quiet zone near by...Fuck me”

“What’s a roc?”

“It’s a bird the size of a car, super aggressive, and will attack anything around its nest.” She explained. “But it isn’t here at the moment... we should be good as long as it stays away....”

“Are you sure?” I asked, pushing the door open and looking through.“

“Yeah, we can do it, no problem. Easy as cake,” Tessa responded, chewing her lip.

“Well... we need more gear, and they will all be dangerous. If we pick and choose, we will skip over all of them,” I admitted with a sigh. “I guess we can run in and out, unless there is something else about them? Will they obsessively hunt us or anything?”

“No, they are dumb as bricks,” She answered. “They will leave us alone once we get far enough away. But it’s not even here. Look, if your that worried, I’ll do it.”

She didn’t give me a chance to respond before she pushed the door open fully and stepped inside, crouching slightly as she headed straight for the pile of rubble. Slowly but surely, she climbed up, eventually hopping over the outer ring of the nest, the crunch of the branches and other woven materials of the nest clearly audible. For a long moment, she froze as if worried the loud sound would alert the roc, wherever it was.

She quickly shook it off and made her way across the nest, barely visible because of the angle. She carefully reached out and grabbed the cache, raising it above her head to show it off, turning back to face me. It looked like it was the smallest cache yet, probably six or seven inches across and tall. It must have been

resting on something because otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to spot it.

She flipped it over in her hands, studying for a moment before she started to come back, making her way across the nest. She had only taken a few steps before a rhythmic thumping sound reached my ears. I could see her eyes widen in panic before looking up to the sky, looking around for the source. I also looked but couldn't see anything yet from where I was.

Still, it must be close if I could hear it this clearly.

Tessa rushed across the nest, hopping over the lip before starting to make her way down the mound. As she took the first few steps, the mound shifted just enough for her to lose her footing. She tumbled and rolled down the pile of rubble, slamming into a chunk of metal hard enough that I could tell she was stunned.

With the sound of thundering wings getting closer, I could hear the cry of the massive bird, a screech that seemed to rattle my teeth. I cursed as Tessa struggled to stand, trying to get up only for the rubble to shift under her again. Once again, the roc cried out, and I realized she didn't have enough time.

I burst from the doorway, dropping my axe and running across the gap straight toward her. Instead of helping her up, I slid next to her, her eyes wide as I reached over, grabbed a slab of roofing, and yanked, pulling it over us, more rubble tumbling down to cover us. Light peeked in from the sides of our impromptu cover, but as far as I could tell, we were both completely hidden.

Not seconds after the rubble stopped shifting, the roc screeched again, very obviously just about on top of us. We could feel the wind tugging and kicking up dust as the massive bird landed in its nest, everything around us jostling as it did. We could feel vibrations as the enormous bird moved and shifted.

Tessa's eyes were wide, and I held a finger to my lips as we lay side by side, facing each other under a long sheet of stiff rubber-like material. She rolled her eyes at my gesture, mouthing "No Shit" to me. Silently we listened to the massive mutant avian as it shifted and moved in its nest. I mentally prayed that it was only stopping by and would leave soon.

We stayed under the board for a while, even as it started to get hot and stale, the rubber heating up in the sun. Almost an hour later, the roc screeched again and took to the skies, the rhythmic thumping of its wings getting fainter and fainter. Together we lift the rubber-like material off of ourselves, both of us breathing the cool air greedily.

"I can't believe that fucking worked," Tessa said, shaking her head. "You're either brilliant or really fucking lucky."

"Little of both, hopefully," I responded with a smile, helping her up to her feet. "Grab the cache, and let's get the hell out of here. We can check out what's in it when we are out of this hellhole."

We both quickly made our way out of the ruined gym, and I grabbed my axe as we did. We almost ran through the halls and back out of the same window we came from, desperately wanting to get out of the area. When we were a few blocks away, we finally slowed down.

"Do we have to worry about one of those snagging us out of nowhere?" I asked as we walked down overgrown and broken sidewalks.

"No, we are too small for them to hunt," Tessa answered. "One of the reasons you don't want to travel with large groups or on anything big unless you can defend it. They only get dangerous to small groups when you're close to their nest."

It took a while, but eventually, we returned to the rickety broken-down house where we had stored our loot earlier. We sat

down to have a break, leaning back against a large tree and enjoying the shade. We sipped from our canteens and recovered before Tessa finally pulled out the cache again.

“So, we gonna check out what we almost died for?” She asked, holding out the green container.

I reached out and waved my arm over the case, not standing or taking it from her. I could hear the hiss and click of the locks freeing before she pried it open. Inside was a single pair of glasses in a style I recognized from my world. They were mostly clear, made of a single band of transparent material that sat high on your nose, very close to your face. Tessa pulled them out from the packaging and tossed it aside, focusing on the glasses. She turned them over in her hand before eventually passing them to me.

“Do they do anything, or are they just safety glasses?” She asked, looking annoyed she couldn’t guess what they were.

I chuckled and took the glasses and scanned them, passing them back to her before reading through the description.

“They are zoom glasses, kinda like digital binoculars,” I explained. “One of the ear things is a touch-activated zoom control, and the other is the focus. They are pretty durable, too, despite how they might look.”

Tessa put the glasses on and fiddled with them for a minute before letting out a gasp.

“Holy fuck... They work!” She said, tapping them more, looking around. “Woah, that’s trippy as fuck.”

“Congrats, as the guide, you should definitely have them,” I said to her. “Use them to keep us from getting eaten by a bird the size of a car.”

“No promises.” She responded, taking the glasses off and clipping them to her shirt. “Now, come on, let’s get back to the APC. I’m not going to feel safe until we do.”

Chapter Sixteen

It took us forty minutes to get back to the APC, the trip taking a bit longer due to Tessa getting distracted by her new glasses. She would stop to look down a street or accidentally slow down while testing out their limits. Thankfully we didn't get lost, but she did apologize for taking us down the wrong road twice before she eventually put her new gear away.

"I'm sorry, I should really be paying more attention," She admitted, shaking her head. "It's never really safe out here, even while we are inside the quiet zone. Sometimes especially inside the zone, since savagers know it exists too."

"Savager?" I asked, confused. "I can probably guess, but what are they?"

"Gangs, raiding thieves, marauders," She explained with a shrug. "Bad people who steal from villages who are already struggling."

"Damn..." I responded, shaking my head. "I guess I can't say I'm surprised groups like that exist."

"Yeah. There are a few smaller camps around the area, but the only big one nearby is about a day and a half walk from home, more if you're playing it safe," She explained. "They can be a problem sometimes, but luckily Bakersfield, my old home, is between the big camp and us, and there is a smaller town even further past the camp. They are dangerous, even more so in the winter, when it's harder to hunt mutants than it is to raid a town."

"Wait, they eat mutants?" I asked curiously, looking over at her. "I assumed since we didn't harvest the displacers, that you're not supposed to do that."

“Well... technically, there are some mutants that are okay to eat, but only in small amounts, and only when you're desperate. But much more than that is *not* good for you. Savager's are constantly eating mutant meat, way more than is safe,” She explained with a shiver. “It makes them more than a little unhinged.”

“Unhinged?”

“Unstable, crazy, psychotic,” Tessa emphasized, shaking her head. “Most of the groups are cannibals, kidnappers, rapists. The meat corrupts them physically, and twists them mentally. It's slow at first but more severe over time. The big groups are the most dangerous, because they go on raiding parties.”

“What about the small ones?”

“They are the ones we would have to worry about stumbling into when we are out like this, but we should be okay,” She answered with a shrug. “They don't sneak around very well, so it's not like you need to sleep with one eye open, but... Keep your eyes peeled, I guess.”

When we finally climbed into the protective shell of the old military vehicle, it was late afternoon, according to the sun. We spent some time unloading what we had found while we were scavenging the four houses before sitting back at the table. We split a can of peaches, the sweet, syrupy preserved fruit a nice reward for an already successful day.

“Alright... needless to say, you proved your point,” Tessa said after swallowing a chunk of fruit. “These tech caches are worth gathering. These glasses are impressive and useful as hell, and clearly not what the world was at before it all went to shit. So, as long as we do this smart and you don't expect me to go diving into a visper nest, I'm all in.”

As she talked, she reached out and offered me her hand. I smiled and nodded, wiping some syrup on my pants before reaching

out and shaking it.

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m not sure how long I would last without someone who knows the area helping out.”

“From what I’ve seen, you would have made it at least a few days if you kept moving and stayed safe at night,” She guessed with a shrug. “Assuming you didn’t do anything dumb trying to get a cache.”

I chuckled, unable to deny her dark prediction. When we finished the peaches, I was about to ask what to do with the empty bowl when Tessa smirked. She poured her canteen into the can, which she had eaten out of until it was three-fourths full. She then covered the top with her hand and shook it carefully before pouring it back into her canteen. She then took a sip with a smile.

“It’s not cold, but it’s still pretty good,” She commented with a smile. “You can do it too. Just use your fork to mix it up instead of shaking it.”

I followed her direction, pouring the water back into my canteen, managing to only spill a tiny bit. I nodded in appreciation after the first sip. Of course, I had had better, but it could be much worse. Plain lukewarm water was already getting boring. When I was done, Tessa leaned forward and gestured to my arm.

“We should pick our next target,” She said simply. “We need to include scaving in our plans, or at least gather enough stuff to have a nice emergency buffer just in case. I’m still low from winter, and if we are going out, we may as well grab more food.”

“What about hunting?” I asked

“You can’t eat mutants, the big game you *can* eat is hard to find, and I don’t have a weapon I can use to hunt with anyway,” She explained, patting her pistol. “This is for emergencies only. Each bullet is worth an entire day’s worth of food and then some. The only

reason I have some is that I found them. They are too expensive otherwise.”

“Why? You have the whole world to scavenge from.”

“Well, for one, it’s been two generations since the Collapse. That’s plenty of time to use up the big armories, civilian ammo too,” She explained, standing from her seat to sit on the edge of her bed. “Plus, according to my Grandpa, they had instituted a way to control people’s guns by restricting ammo sales. I’m not sure I understood what he was talking about, but he seemed pretty against the concept of gun control.”

“So, no hunting, just scaving then. Alright, that sounds like a plan,” I nodded, pulling up the map, marking our location, and zooming out. “We should avoid blue markers for now, and if one shows up when we are on the move, we should steer clear. Whatever prevented them from getting it before will be more dangerous than we have seen so far.”

“Because whatever is in the blue caches is more valuable, so they would be more willing to risk danger to gather it. Which means whatever is preventing that must be more dangerous,” Tessa finished, nodding along. “Yeah, I’ve got that figured out, thanks. So we stick to greens and whites until we get something to give us a bigger advantage.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Cool. Then we should head up here tomorrow,” She said, pointing out a green point on the map. “I haven’t been up that way since I did my first sweep of the area, and there were a couple of houses up there. Yeah, these ones right here.”

She drew a circle around a couple of buildings marked on the map, though her finger didn’t interact at all with the projection. They were in the same general direction as the green reward.

“These should be our main looting target, but since there are two of us, we should investigate most of what we stumble across,” She explained. “If we are lucky, we might find you something to sleep on that isn’t caked with mold.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” I responded, nodding along. “It’s only been one night, and I can already feel it. How did you get a whole mattress?”

“Pure luck,” She said with a smirk, leaning back in her chair. “There is a delivery truck about a five-minute walk from here. I cracked it open, and there was mattress all rolled up tight on its way to some poor bastard.”

“Wait, a delivery truck full of stuff?” I asked skeptically. “Why was someone out making deliveries?”

“Well... I don’t know exactly, I wasn’t born yet,” she pointed out with a shrug. “But according to my Gran, the Collapse happened at different rates in different places. Some places had time to evacuate, like the city, while other places got rolled over by some disease or illness that killed the whole population in hours. It all depended on what mutated horror struck them first. Though the mutated diseases were apparently what wiped out most people.”

“Those still a problem?” I asked.

“Sorta? Occasionally one will wipe out a town. It’s happened... maybe twice since I was a kid?” Tessa explained after taking a sip from her canteen. “But humanity is too spread out now for them to wipe out the millions they did before the Collapse. Anyway, my best guess is that the driver was a loony.”

“Loony? Like crazy?” I asked.

“Yes, but specifically someone who went crazy around the Collapse,” She explained with a shrug. “Think about it, whole cities were dying overnight, animals and plants were mutating into horrible

deadly abominations, and the world was crumbling. Not surprising that a few people cracked and tried to pretend nothing was happening. I'd say all of them are dead by now, but my Gran would tell stories about them."

"That's... Horrifying... and understandable," I admitted, looking down at my canteen, swirling the peach-flavored water inside. "I can't imagine the strain that would put people under."

We were quiet for a long while, my mind wondering over the chaos this world must have been in during that period. Tessa admitted that a lot could have changed since she was last in that area, but she was confident that we could at least escape anything that could have moved in. Eventually, we decided to head to bed early and wake up accordingly to take advantage of the morning calmness.

When we were done planning for the night, I remade my bed between the storage shelves in the far back of the APC. I was asleep almost immediately.

The next morning was a rush to get out into the abandoned town, wanting to spend as much time traveling during the morning calmness as possible. I once again questioned the validity of the morning actually being calmer or if Tessa had just fallen into some sort of old wives tale or superstition, but she insisted it was true.

We made good time, heading in almost the exact opposite direction as the previous day. We spent about an hour making our way through the town, only stopping when we reached an intersection where two cars had collided during the Collapse and were now covered in moss and vines. On a hunch, I used my axe to cut away the green and brown vines on the back end of both cars while Tessa went through the front ends. The first trunk was filled with rotted clothes and other ruined things, probably remnants of what a family gathered before evacuating. The other trunk had plenty of junk as well, but it also had a rolled-up tool kit that was pretty

comprehensive as far as I could tell. It was missing a few tools to my eyes, but considering the tech gap, that was to be expected.

“That’s a great find,” Tessa said when she saw it. “New tools are always in demand, and a full kit like that will get snatched up quickly.”

“You don’t have a use for it?” I asked, sealing the tools back up.

“No, I have the basics back at the APC, but I’m not the maker type. I did the demo in the APC when I first moved in, cut some small holes for a chimney and stuff, and put together the shelves, but I scavenged most of the other stuff I needed. Do you want it?”

“... maybe. I have some experience fixing stuff, but I don’t know if it will apply out here,” I admitted, passing the tools to Tessa.

“Ah, Scifi boy doesn’t know how to fix our primitive technology.” She teased, putting the tools and whatever she found on the back seat of one of the cars, hiding it under half-rotted and falling apart clothes. “We can grab these on the way back. No reason to be lugging everything around.”

I rolled my eyes at her joke but didn’t correct her, mostly because she was at least partially correct. I was most definitely spoiled by the tech we had at home. Unfortunately, I didn’t think I would have access to self-welding paste or heat-cut markers.

We made our way through the town until we reached our first actual stop, two rows of houses, three on each side. One of them was a burnt-out husk, while another was half-collapsed with a truck of some kind embedded in one of the corners. After a few moments’ break, we headed to the first house, Tessa stopping me by the front steps.

“Okay, so yesterday was a trail run. Today we are scaving for real,” She said, unclipping her hatchet, holding it in her off-hand.

“Food is our main priority, but anything we can trade for more food is also worth grabbing. The basic rule is anything that you’re surprised to see is probably worth grabbing. Clothes are everywhere, so they are hardly worth touching, but a nice leather jacket is surprising and worth grabbing. Pocket knives are all over the place, but a combat knife is surprising and worth grabbing... get the pattern?”

“Yeah, makes sense. I assume jewelry is useless?”

“Eh... usually it’s not worth grabbing unless it’s something crazy, but to be honest, I don’t know the first thing about jewelry, so I usually make a note of anything crazy and leave it. Functional watches, on the other hand, are worth a lot. Sundials are annoying, and no one likes using them.”

We entered the first house, and she sent me upstairs while she investigated the bottom floor. I was pretty sure it was a test to see how much stuff I could find, but I was happy to prove myself. Besides, it wasn’t exactly rocket science. Shit that could be useful got taken, and shit that wasn’t was left behind.

I climbed the stairs, entered the first room, and quickly got to work, starting with the desk in the far corner. There was a computer on it, but that wasn’t worth anything without power. I went through the desk, looked under the bed, and finally searched the closet before moving on to the next room. Eventually, I cleared the entire second floor, gathering everything worth wild and heading back down. In all, I found two watches, one pink with some sort of cartoon animal on it, the other metallic and much heftier feeling. I also found a first aid bag, a bottle of expensive-looking whiskey, and a black duffel bag in the first room’s closet. In the second room, I found a compass, which took a minute for me to recognize from the compass app on my chip, a few lighters, a much cheaper-looking bottle of alcohol, and a bag of glowsticks. In the third room, which was where I found the pink watch, I also found a violin, which seemed to be in good condition. I really didn’t know much about the instrument, but I knew they could be expensive.

I put all my finds on the kitchen table, which was already stacked with jars and cans, as well as a bag of something I didn't recognize. Tessa returned carrying a book and a bag full of what looked like candles.

"What's a banana?" I asked, holding up a bag labeled "Banana Chips."

"It's a fruit, looks like that," She said, pointing to the sticker on the large bag. "They dry them, and I think maybe fry them? I don't know, but with DMAS, they just about last forever."

"DMAS?"

"Yeah, it's what they add to canned stuff to make it stable past just the normal several years. It was something new just before the Collapse," She explained with a shrug. "Fuck if I know what it is, but Grandpa said the guy who invented it is the only reason there are any humans around anymore."

"Huh... I guess I never asked," I said, lying by omission.

I knew canned stuff back home could last for a century before the inner lining began to fail, but I wasn't sure how it worked here.

"Yeah, it took us a few years before we had stabilized enough to survive winters without pre-Collapse food," She continued, picking up a can and inspecting it. "According to Grandpa, at least. My mom was technically alive at the tail end of that point, but she didn't remember it."

"Well... I'm glad that it's all still good, but why are these chips okay, but the other food looks like it might talk back if I say hello?"

"Because it didn't work on a lot of dry food," Tessa responded easily. "Most of it, in fact. The stuff it does work on was packaged in

sturdier packaging instead of the biodegradable stuff everything else was.”

As she talked, Tessa had a wistful look on her face for a moment, chuckling to herself. After a while, she shook her head, turning back to me.

“Sorry, just had a blast from the past,” She said, her face still nostalgic and wistful. “I was just remembering having similar conversations with my family. Asking questions was kind of my thing when I was younger. Grandpa would call me Mrs. Why.”

She turned her focus back onto the table and started reviewing what I had found. She was surprised I had done so well and admitted she had planned on going up there after me to see what I had missed. I assured her it was probably a good idea and that it would be a good way to learn if I watched her search the room.

She agreed, and we spent about fifteen minutes giving each room a once-over. She found a box tucked up under the large bed in the largest room, which turned out to be a fully stocked fishing supplies box and an unopened collapsible rod.

“Other than this, you did a good job,” She assured me when we returned to the kitchen. “I almost missed the tackle box as well.”

We spent a few minutes packing everything together, filling the duffle bag I had found first, and putting the last few cans into our bags before hiding the extra bag by the stairs. With one house down, we moved to the next one.

Chapter Seventeen

We scavenged through all the houses over the next few hours, the sun rising higher as we cleared each home. We found a lot of stuff for trade, some cans of food, and a few bags of dry food as well. About halfway through, I checked my map and spotted a white crate in a nearby backyard.

A quick look around and the map led us to what had once been a pool but was now a tiny swampy pond. It smelled horrible, and sitting in the center on a pile of natural debris was a white box, no bigger than a foot wide and half as deep. I groaned and was about to step into the water when Tessa grabbed me and pulled me back.

“Yeah, bad idea.” She said, shaking her head and peering into the disgusting water. “Who knows what lives in that.”

“Seriously?” I asked, following her look. “What’s the worst thing that could be in a pool this small?”

“Flesh-eating parasites that slowly consume your brain and turn you into a mindless angry husk.” She answered smoothly before looking at me and smirking. “Or just some mosquito spawn, but stagnant water isn’t worth the risk. Anything enclosed like this is dangerous. Mutations happen quickly for insects and smaller stuff, especially in an environment like that. Look right there.”

She pointed down and to the left, seeing something I clearly missed. It took a second for me to spot it, but there was a black-stained skull sitting just under the top layer of the mucky water. It wasn’t human, but it wasn’t small either.

“Holy fuck...” I said, taking a step back.

“It was probably desperate for water,” Tessa explained, shrugging nonchalantly. “Seems like a bad idea to go swimming in

anything that can do that.

“So, how do we get it?” I asked, tearing my eyes away from the double fist-sized skull and looking around for a moment before spotting a shed tucked up in the corner of the overgrown backyard.

Tessa followed my look and nodded.

“Okay, you try and figure this out. I’m going to finish clearing this house. I saw a hunting magazine on the counter, so fingers crossed we find something nice.”

With a pat on my shoulder, she turned and headed back inside the house, leaving me to my own devices. I cursed myself internally. I should have known better. The fact that the crate was here meant it was dangerous in some way, so the fact that I couldn’t see anything should have set me on edge, not reassured me. I shook my head and headed to the shed.

The door was locked with a chunk of metal, but the metal pieces that were screwed into the door didn’t stand a chance when I slammed my axe in and pried it off. I held my axe at the ready, pulled the door open, and stepped back, prepared to react to anything inside.

When nothing came out at me, I relaxed slightly, looking around in the shed. A decent amount of equipment and machines were inside, along with tools hung up on the wall. I spent a few minutes going through everything, eventually deciding that the tools probably weren’t worth much. I did, however, find a long piece of metallic pipe that I took back to the edge of the pool and used to slowly coax the white crate closer. After a few minutes, I finally got it close enough to grab, pulling it out of the foul-smelling water and onto the concrete walkway around the pool.

I contemplated opening it immediately but decided to instead head inside and grab a rag, wiping the box down carefully. Just as I was about to open the crate, I heard a whoop of excitement coming

from upstairs. A short time later, Tessa returned downstairs carrying a three or four-foot-long plastic case.

“Oh, you got it, great. We can do a show and tell,” She said, putting her case on the table and popping it open.

Nestled inside the rather well-built case was some kind of bow. I recognized it from movies and history classes, but I didn’t remember this particular kind. It had a lot more parts and things attached to it than I had seen before.

“I was right, who ever lived here was a hunter,” She said with a grin, reaching into the case and pulling out the bow. “This is a compound bow, and from what I can tell, it’s in almost perfect shape! It has all the bells and whistles too! I’ve been looking for something like this for ages! This is exactly what I was talking about before.”

“Something to hunt with?” I asked.

“Mhmm, with this, we could start adding real, fresh meat to the menu,” She explained with an eager look. “Not to mention it’s a good ranged option for self-defense too.”

She started examining the bow, testing it, and pulling the string back before slowly releasing the tension. When she was done checking the bow’s structural integrity, she started going through the case itself.

“A pack of replacements tips, extra fletching, extra cordage for the bow, a few replacement parts, holy hell, this is the motherload. This is worth enough food for a whole winter, Leon.” She said with an excited grin. “Oh, this just made feeding and defending ourselves a hell of a lot easier.”

As she talked, she pulled out four arrows, checking them closely before clipping them to the side of the bow and pulling out some sort of strap system. She pulled it around her shoulders before shutting the case and clipping the bow to the strap under her arm.

When she was done, she turned to me and gestured to herself, bow hanging by her side, under her arm about six inches above hip level.

“Well?” she asked, turning in place.

“Looks good, a solid find,” I said with a nod. “Anything we can use to protect ourselves is a win in my book. You know how to shoot it properly?”

“Yeah, my dad has something similar,” She explained. “I can shoot it just fine.”

I nodded before waving my arm close to the tech cache, breaking its seal. I was going to comment about giving me her gun, just in case, but I wasn't sure that would be received very well. We seemed to be meshing well so far, for the two days I had known this complete stranger at least, but I wasn't sure just how far that would go.

I opened the container and frowned, pulling out a sizeable blanket. I scanned it with my wrist projector and shook my head, chuckling.

“Looks like you took our luck,” I said, showing her the info my projector gave me about the find.

“... A blanket?” She asked, looking a bit dumbfounded. “Your special, high-tech cache is a really nice blanket?”

“Well, it says it will adjust for how hot it is... But yeah, pretty much,” I responded, folding it up and tucking it back into my bag. “They can't all be winners.”

We finished looting the houses, grabbing anything worth anything, stacking it outside, and hiding the piles as best we could. We ended up finding way more than we could carry, but making two trips to such a close neighborhood was fine as long as we got back to the APC at a reasonable time.

Once everything was set, we headed off, making a beeline for the green cache. I checked the map frequently, and at one point, a blue crate appeared out of nowhere. By pure luck, I was looking at the map when it appeared, meaning it was just about three hundred meters away. I grabbed Tessa's armor and motioned her to be silent, directing her to my map. She cursed under her breath.

Slowly, with our heads on swivels, we made our way to some cover, hiding along a broken-down fence and an oversized empty garage of some sort. Once we were safe and covered, we looked at the map again.

"Any idea what it could be?" I asked quietly, still keeping an eye out.

"No, not a clue. Is there any chance that people just missed one, and this is safe?" She asked, silently pulling an arrow out and getting her bow ready.

"...No, that would be very unlikely."

"Okay, then we have three choices. We go around, cutting around by at least as much distance as we have right now," She explained, looking up over the fence for a moment. "Second option is we head back, spend the rest of the day getting everything back to the APC and figure out a different cache to go after."

"What about number three?"

"We go after it," She said, leaning against the garage's exterior wall. "Or at least investigate closer."

"That... seems like a pretty bad idea," I said, shaking my head. "I thought the plan was to stock up on greens and then go after some blues when we were confident we could handle them."

"Yeah...Yeah, you're probably right," She said, shaking her head. "But what if I got up in a tree and scouted the area with

these?”

She tapped her glasses, and I couldn't help but chew on my lip. This could end badly, but it would be entertaining, and nothing in this hell world was safe. Eventually, I sighed and nodded.

“Okay, but let's stay nice and far away,” I said. “I don't want to risk pissing off whatever makes this cache dangerous.”

“Don't worry, I might be greedy for cool stuff, but I'm not stupid,” She pointed out, looking around before pointing to a copse of trees about two hundred feet away. “It looks like there are some tree's over there, C'mon.”

I followed behind the experienced scavenger, nervously looking around as we made our way to the trees as quietly as possible. When we arrived at the shaded area, Tessa unclipped her bow and handed it to me. She rubbed her hands before looking at me and winking.

“Catch me if I fall, yeah?”

She was climbing before I could comment, practically scurrying up the branches. Before long, she was almost completely obscured from my angle. I opened my mouth to call to her before cursing softly under my breath. Being loud would probably be a terrible idea. I waited impatiently for her, the wind shifting slightly as I looked around nervously.

It was a good five or so minutes before she started making her way back down, this time going much slower. When she dropped the last few feet to the ground, I handed her weapon back, which she gratefully took.

“Alright, so first things first, much more difficult,” She said quietly, leaning against the tree she had just descended. “It's a den of skelly-wolves.”

She waited for my reaction, but I only stared back at her. After a moment, she slapped her forehead and groaned.

“Right, okay. They are kind of like wolves but have extra bone plates around their torso. And on their heads,” She said, frowning and shaking her head. “I could take one down with my pistol, but I doubt I have enough ammo, and I would have to get lucky with my bow. They are vicious bastards, so we should-”

The trees shifted slightly in the wind, the leaves rustling in the breeze. It was a surprisingly soothing sound, but Tessa paled almost immediately, standing quickly.

“When did the wind change direction?” She asked, looking around almost manically. “Fuck, it’s blowing toward them. We need to go, we-”

Before she could continue, the howling wolves echoed around us, freezing us in fear. We both pushed through the surprise simultaneously and broke out into a run, darting back along the road with Tessa in the lead.

“What’s wrong? I asked as we ran, Tessa heading into the street.

She immediately climbed up onto the broken down and burnt-out car that was sitting in the middle of the road, helping me jump up as well.

“They hunt by scent, more than most mutants do,” She explained. “And the wind shifted towards them. They-”

Another howl echoed through the relatively large clearing, and we nervously looked around. Tessa slapped my shoulder and pointed out a singular creature breaking the treeline. It was wolf-like, but its body was weirdly proportioned. Its legs were longer than a typical canine, and a set of sharp spines ran along its back. Several plates of bone-like armor covered its body, with matted fur pushing out from in between them.

It immediately snarled and growled at us, its eyes locked on and staring us down.

Before I could say anything, acknowledging that I saw it, a second wolf stepped out into the light. Nervously I looked around and spotted two more to the left of the car and another two to the back right.

“They already have us surrounded,” I said to Tessa, nodding to the additional mutants.

“Fuck. Watch those two closely. You’re gonna have to take them out when they charge,” She said before unclipping her new bow and tossing it into a patch of overgrown grass. “I’m going to try to take out as many as possible with my pistol, but I doubt I will get all six.”

“Gotcha. I’ve got your back,” I said, hefting my ax in a tighter grip.

“Good. Wait for the-”

Before she could finish her sentence, all of the mutated dogs charged, barking and snarling as they sprinted toward the car.

Chapter Eighteen

The wolves bolted towards us faster than I thought possible, their long legs folding and moving in ways that made me queasy to watch. I watched as the two Tessa put me in charge of taking down made a beeline for us, doing my best to put the others out of my mind.

I nearly fell off the car's trunk when her pistol's loud bang echoed from behind me. It also startled the dogs, who hesitated for a moment before rushing towards us again. Tessa fired repeatedly, and I could hear the yowls and whines of the dogs she had shot so far.

Again I focused on the charging dogs, cursing under my breath as one jumped up to bite at me, having reached the car. I kicked at it, cursing as it ducked and attempted to bite me again. This time I swung my ax, an awkward swing that still just managed to connect. The mutated canine yelped, falling off the back of the car in a pained roll, but quickly got back to its feet. Its partner immediately took its place, jumping up and chomping dangerously close to my arm. I held the ax with one hand on the bottom and the other just under the metal head, jabbing down at the slathering animal, knocking it in the head as well.

Two more shots echoed behind me, followed by a curse, before I finally caught one of the wolves with a severe blow, swinging the ax and slamming it in a gap between its organic bone plates that protected its back. The mutant wolf's back end suddenly went limp, the large beast rolling off the car, yelping and barking as it tried to move.

With a triumphant shout, I swung against the second wolf, knocking it off the car truck and-

The air was driven from my lungs as a canine-shaped missile tackled me off the car. It seemed to take minutes for us to smash into

the ground, both of us rolling before I managed to get up on one knee.

Somehow, a third wolf had managed to sneak around and tackle me to the ground. As I stood up to my feet, I cursed loudly, staring down at the new wolf that was in between me and the car. Before I could even think about grabbing the ax, which had landed a few feet from me, the second, uninjured canine I had been fighting before, tackled me to the ground.

I raised my arm, the wolf latching onto it, chewing on my arm. I could feel him struggling to tear through the cloth of my jacket, which told me that if I hadn't been wearing it, the wolf would already be tearing chunks from me.

I yanked out the knife Tessa had gotten me the day before and started stabbing the slobbering, mutated canine. More than a few times, the knife bounced off an armor plate, but when I finally managed to find a gap, I cut it as deeply as possible. I could feel it getting weaker when I heard Tessa shout a surprisingly close "No!" and felt a second set of jaws wrap around my leg.

I yelled, screaming out in pain as I finally managed to stab the wolf that had me pinned right in the face. I could feel it punching through the thin bone behind the eye, carving into the brain behind it. Immediately it went limp, forcing me to roll it off me, even as another wolf chewed on my leg.

I finally pushed the dead dog off myself, still screaming, and I could see the skelly-wolf chewing on my leg, just above my ankle. Before I could do anything myself, Tessa slammed her machete into its skull, cracking its bone plate. The dog let go of me to defend itself, only for Tessa to swing again and get lucky, her blade sinking halfway through its neck as she hit right between a gap between the plates.

The mutated monstrosity, its jaws still wet with my blood, jerked a few times as it went through its death throes before it finally

went limp, Tessa's machete still stuck inside it.

Tessa looked around, both of us silently listening for any more mutated wolves. As she looked and listened, she quickly reloaded her pistol, only holstering it after scanning the entire area. I turned and slid against the car, leaning my back against it.

"Fuck, that hurts," I cursed as Tessa kneeled beside me.

Wordlessly she pulled out her knife and quickly cut the bottom half of my pant leg off, revealing a series of bloody cuts and tears.

"I really hope you're right about being immune to infections," She said, shaking her head.

As she talked, she pulled out her canteen and poured the water over my wounds so she could inspect them. They were gruesome, and the water burned as it washed away the blood, but even I could see they could be worse. She pulled out a ragged bandage and wrapped my leg up.

"Those need to be stitched shut," She said as she finished the wrapping. "Otherwise, they are just going to keep opening. You might heal quickly, but not that quick. Other than that, you're a lucky son of a bitch. I thought it was going to tear you to shreds."

"Yeah, okay, lucky me," Can you do it?" I responded sarcastically. "Can you stitch me up?"

"I can. Wouldn't be the first time, and it's easier to work on someone else," She assured me. "I could bring you into Bakersfield to get someone more skilled to look at you, but... they might not help you if you're with me."

"As long as you can do it right, I don't care," I said, shaking my head before looking. "So are there going to be more skelly-wolves coming or...?"

“No, I think we killed the pack,” She responded, looking to my right, toward the front of the car.

Sure enough, there were five bodies, one more than we had initially seen. Between the one Tessa killed with her machete, the one I killed, and the one I disabled, which was still currently moving around, partially paralyzed, there were eight mutants in total.

“This is a pretty big pack already,” She explained, standing up slowly. “I spotted the extra two around their den. They must have come running when they heard the barking.”

She walked over to the dog that her machete was still stuck in, putting her foot on its head and yanking her weapon out. She then walked around the car and put the last mutant out of its misery.

“Dammit,” I cursed, struggling to stand, using the car to pull myself.

My leg burned as I put weight on it, threatening to give out with every step. I grabbed some more bandages from my pack before taking off my jacket. I laid the jacket on the car before rolling up a bloody and torn sleeve to show off the teeth marks that dotted my arm.

“A bit worse than those displacers bastards, huh?” I said, Tessa turning back to see my bloody arm. She cursed and rushed back.

“Dammit, they got through your jacket?” She asked, taking my arm and examining it.

The damage wasn't nearly as bad as it looked, as quickly washing the blood off showed that it was just a series of shallow punctures rather than the tearing wound that was currently making it very hard to stand. Tessa quickly wrapped it up, and I put my jacket back on over it.

“So... How well can you walk?” She asked, looking me up and down.

“Not very well...I think I’m stuck to hobbling for now.”

I tested my leg again, wincing and clenching my teeth as the pain spiked. Tessa saw this and ran to the woods again, returning shortly after with a crude crutch, basically just a branch with a “Y” on one end. She quickly measured it and trimmed it down before testing it again.

“Better?” She asked, and I nodded in confirmation after tucking the crutch under my shoulder and leaning on it.

“Yeah, it’s tolerable for now.”

“Good, because I’m going to grab the blue cache, and then we will head back.”

“What? Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked, wincing as I shifted my leg wrong.

“Yes, I’m sure. We killed the bastards, might as well have what they were ‘guarding,’” She explained, pulling out her pistol and handing it to me before adding. “Here, in case we miscounted.”

I nodded, and she quickly grabbed her discarded bow and rushed off at a light jog. I nervously looked around, trying to look in every direction at once. About ten minutes passed, and I was starting to get nervous. I was trying to figure out how I would go after her when she returned carrying a blue briefcase.

“Any problems?” I asked as she got closer.

“Not really. There were a couple of pups that I... well, I think you can imagine,” She responded, letting out a huff, handing over the briefcase.

I took it and waved my arm over it, waiting for the familiar sound of a cache unsealing before cracking it open to find two vials inside, both containing blue liquid. I pulled them from the case and tucked them into my breast pocket.

“We can check what they do when we get back,” I said, answering Tessa’s curious look.

She reluctantly agreed. We gathered everything and quickly headed out, the pace much slower than before. Eventually, we made it to the houses we had looted, where Tessa gathered as much stuff as she could, filling my pack as well. We gathered everything we couldn’t carry, which was much more than we had hoped, and stashed it under a porch.

By the time we got back, the sun was starting to set. Tessa got everything we had scavenged inside before climbing back down and helping me climb in. By the time I was inside the APC, I was pale and sweating from the journey home, including the struggle to get inside.

Once we were enclosed inside, Tessa spent a few minutes getting everything moved around, collapsing the table, and setting up a small area to work in before we started the process of stitching my wounds closed. I sat back and did my best not to clench up as she pulled my leg into her lap and slowly began to close the few tears that needed the help. I was very thankful she had a first aid kit extensive enough to have a thread that would dissolve on its own.

“Ever had stitches before?” She asked, trying to keep me distracted as she pushed the curved needle through my skin with a pair of pliers.

“No, we don’t use them anymore,” I explained through a tight jaw. “We used medical glue.”

“I think we did as well before everything went to shit,” She admitted with a shrug. “We either ran out, or it went bad because I’ve

never been able to get my hands on a usable bottle.”

“Half tempted to just wrap it up in- Ouch!” I started to say, getting cut off when Tessa poked me a bit too hard. She winced and apologized before she continued. “Wrap it up in tape.”

“No, it needs to breathe. Otherwise, your skin goes all soft, and it has a hard time healing,” She explained, still focused on my leg.

Over the next hour or so, Tessa stitched me together as best she could. It hurt like a bastard, but I managed to suffer through it without too much complaining. When she finally finished and had given my leg a final cleaning, she pulled out a bottle of whiskey and poured me a double.

“Sip it slowly,” She said, putting the bottle away. “It will help you sleep through the night, even when it starts to ache.”

We shifted around a bit, resetting the table and chairs. Well, Tessa did, I mostly just watched her. I had been injured for less than five hours, and I already hated it.

“So, are we going to find out what those vials do?” She asked curiously when she finally settled down, sitting on the edge of her bed. “Don’t forget you promised me a healing one.”

“I promised you would get one if we found one, not that we would definitely find one,” I pointed out, pulling the two vials from my pocket. “These aren’t the health ones anyway. Those are green.”

I scanned the vials quickly, Tessa’s eagerness overriding my annoyance with my injury. I pushed up the screen and started reading through the description.

“Well... we have a bit of a decision to make,” I said, putting the self-injecting serum vials on the table. “We are now the owners of two strength enhancement serums.”

Tessa leaned forward and picked one up, studying it closely. I had to admit, the temptation to snatch it back from her was pretty big.

“How strong will one make someone?” She asked, eventually putting the injector down.

“That’s a good question. I know it’s not zero to Superman in one vial, and I also know that it will be at least noticeable,” I explained with a shrug. “It’s also not like... just strength... it’s more like body strengthening... the user isn’t going to be tougher, but it’s a bunch of small enhancements that result in the person being stronger, I guess.”

“Well... There isn’t much point for us to split them if the effects are minimal,” She pointed out. “We should test it. You can take one, and if it is a huge leap, then I’ll take the second one.”

“And if it’s small, I’ll take the second one as well?” I asked.

“Yeah, not much point in being slightly, barely noticeably, kinda sorta stronger.” She pointed out before smirking and continuing. “Besides, that just means I’ll get dibs on the next few things.”

“Alright, alright, that works for me. But just to let you know, I will need to eat more for the next few days. And my normal diet will be a bit bigger normally as well.”

“Fuck... Should have seen that coming,” She cursed, looking over at her food storage, seemingly going over something in her head. “Okay, fine. We will use it tomorrow morning when we can monitor everything more easily. I’ll run back to the neighborhood and grab everything we left behind.”

“By yourself?” I asked nervously.

“I’ve been doing this alone for a long time, tough guy. I’m sure I’ll survive one light scav trip by myself,” She assured me, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’ll try and contact some people, trade some of the stuff we found for fresh food, maybe some jerky or pickled stuff. You can heal up, and then we can decide if we are splitting them or if your gonna be the strongman by yourself.”

“... Right, okay,” I said, nodding in agreement with her general plan.

“Good. Now go the fuck to sleep. I need to finish putting everything away.”

I finished my drink, feeling the slight warmth spreading through my stomach. I made my bed, using Tessa’s extra blanket as a bit of extra cushion, my jacket as a pillow, and the special blanket we found in the white cache as a... well, as a blanket. Despite the dull ache in my leg, I fell asleep before Tessa was done putting everything away.

Unfortunately, I didn’t stay asleep for very long. Sometime around three or four in the morning I woke up to the sound of distant screaming. It was high, and primal, like a young woman or child running for their lives. I bolted upright, only for Tessa to speak up.

“It’s fine, it’s just a screamer,” She explained. “Or a couple of them at least. They just sound like that, it’s not a real person.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, fighting through the thick mental fog. “That sounds...”

I winced and trailed off when another scream made it through the APC’s armor. It sounded like it was pretty far away, but it still made me shiver at how it sounded.

“Disturbing? I know,” She responded, still laying back on her bed. “Their nest is pretty far away so I don’t usually hear them. Lucky us.”

I snorted and did my best to ignore the distant sound, trying to fall back asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

The following day I woke up to a sore and slightly swollen leg. Tessa was already getting ready to head out and get the loot we left behind when I started putting away my bed.

“How do you feel?” She asked while double-checking her pack.

“I feel fine. I think my leg is a little swollen, and it aches obviously, but it doesn’t look infected,” I assured her, examining my leg as I did.

“Alright. If you start feeling sick... well, don’t fall asleep,” She warned me.

“Isn’t that for concussions?” I asked with a chuckle.

She laughed as well and pushed open the top hatch, pulling herself up and out. I passed her backpack, which was mostly empty, followed by her brand-new bow, arrows already clipped in.

“I’ll be gone for like two hours tops,” she said, looking down into the old, rusted armored vehicle. “When I get back, you should take the serum.”

“Alright. After two hours, I’ll come looking for you.”

“Yeah, sure, you’ll definitely be able to take down whatever took me down,” she said with a scoff. “My guns on the bed in case something goes really wrong. It’s got six shots, and there are three spare bullets. Those bullets are worth more than everything we have found scavenging together a few times over, so don’t waste them.”

I looked over, and sure enough, her pistol was resting on her mattress with three bullets stacked next to it. I nodded and looked back up, but she was already closing the hatch. I could hear her

crawling down the side of the APC. She slapped the armored side of the vehicle once she was down before leaving me alone.

I let out a long, steady breath, waiting for a while to make sure she was fast gone before looking up. I knew that I had drones following and recording me, but since I had no idea where they were, I just had to guess.

“I know this must be incredibly boring for viewers, watching me wait around and heal,” I said. “So, could I propose a solution? If you mark a few reward crates with healing serums, Tessa and I could go out and find them. It would be like a quest of sorts, and having a few healing serums in each of us would keep us from spending too much time recovering from injuries.”

I silently waited for a response, but when none came, I let out an aggravated sigh, leaning against the interior wall. I spent a few minutes just sitting there before I started looking for something to do. About thirty minutes in, I found a book tucked away in one of the containers Tessa had under a shelf. I cracked it open and sat down in the far back of the APC, using my blankets and jacket to cushion the hard, cold floor.

After twenty minutes of reading, a beep startled me, my injured leg slapping against a shelf hard enough for me to curse out loudly in pain. After I recovered from hitting my injury and finished checking to make sure I didn't tear any of my stitches, I tapped my projector, the source of the noise.

It took me a minute to find it, but after scanning my map for a minute or two, I finally noticed that a single green crate was marked with a little plus sign next to it, while a blue one had two marks. The closest was the green, which was over twice the distance away as the Roc nest had been, and the blue was even further than that, in the opposite direction.

“That's perfect!” I said, pumping my fist. “Thanks, Ilbryen, assuming you had anything to do with that. Now I just need a story

for why I suddenly know what these caches are... Fuck.”

I spent the rest of my alone time trying to puzzle out an excuse, eventually settling on one just a half hour before Tessa returned. During that time, I pushed open the hatch and managed to drag myself out onto the exterior, going more than a bit stir-crazy inside. She returned with a full backpack and two large duffel bags filled with stuff, most of which were for trading rather than keeping.

“Probably not the best idea to be hanging around outside while injured,” She pointed out. “This area is pretty cleared out, but still.”

“I was going crazy being stuck inside with nothing to do,” I said with a shrug.

She tossed me the first bag, and I carefully lowered it into the APC, doing the same for the second duffel. Tessa climbed up, and we both dropped back inside. I somehow managed to avoid hitting or straining my leg this time.

“Alright, I already left a message at the drop point, so John will be by to check it in the next few days... hopefully,” She said as she settled in, sitting on the edge of her bed. “With any luck, he is out hunting right now and will come back and see it rather than finding it on the way out for a long hunt.”

“Can I ask why we can’t just go into town?” I asked as I settled down into the seat by the small table.

I already knew she had issues with the town, but I wanted to know just how deep those issues went.

“Bakersfield is the nearest town, and it’s the one I used to live in,” She reluctantly explained. “It’s not a fun story, b-but... Basically, I wasn’t kidding when I threatened you the first night you slept here.”

It took me a minute to remember what threat she was talking about, my eyes going wide when I did.

“What? Why would they kick you out for defending yourself against assault like that?”

“The guy who did it was the mayor’s son. He had a lot of pull and, well, plenty of people thought I went too far.”

“Fuck that. He was trying to... force himself on you?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck him then. He had it coming.”

Tessa, who had been looking down, pretending to be busy with what was in the duffel bag, looked up at me. She smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Yeah... I know. Thanks.”

We finished going through everything, setting aside what Tessa planned on trading, before sitting back around. After a few more minutes of talking, Tessa brought up the strength serum. A few minutes later, I was holding the first vial, working up my courage before eventually injecting it in the same way Ibryen injected the healing serum. Where the healing serum had been a deep, immediate pain that faded over time as it spread, this was almost the exact opposite.

At first, it was cold, a soreness spreading out from my leg, my muscles twitching as the ache spread and grew in intensity. Soon the ache was accompanied by sharp spikes of pain that made me flinch and clench my teeth. By the time the pain had spread to my entire body, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head, I had rolled off the chair and lay in the middle of the APC, cursing and groaning as my muscles spasmed.

“Holy fuck, this is really intense,” Tessa commented, kneeling beside me and looking worried. “Are you sure this is okay? Is it

working how it's supposed to?"

"I-I-I'm s-s-sure it's FINE!" I managed to choke out, the last part coming out as a shout as the pain reached my spine.

It felt like a spike of iron, soaked in liquid nitrogen, was being shoved through my entire spinal column, vertebrae by vertebrae. When it finally reached the top of my neck, I could feel the cold surrounding my skull, reaching my eyes before I finally snapped into unconsciousness.

I came to with a jerk, my entire body was sore, and the coiling cold that seemed to touch every part of my body had almost completely receded. Tessa was still leaning over me, still looking concerned.

"How long was I out?" I asked, slowly pushing myself up.

The soreness was slowly accompanied by and overtaken by fatigue that seemed to fill every single muscle fiber. Even my eyes felt tired.

"A minute, maybe. Not much more than that. How do you feel?"

"Sore, tired... and hungry."

"Yeah, whatever the hell that was, it looked like it would take a lot out of you."

By the time we had the cans of food open, my stomach was growling, and the fatigue was getting worse. I had two cans of beans, two cans of preserved meat, and a can of some sort of creamy, chunky soup. Tessa just had a can of vegetables and a can of meat.

"That was a lot of food," Tessa commented once we were both finished. "How long are you going to have to eat like that?"

“A day or so,” I commented sheepishly. “We can do a few days of heavy scaving to cover the cost... And hope we find a metabolism serum.”

“Does that do what I think it does?”

“Yeah. We will need some before we start to heavily improve ourselves with serums,” I explained, shaking my head. “Otherwise, we won’t be able to keep up with our diet no matter what we eat.”

“Damn... how many improvements are we limited to?”

“I think two strengths are our limit,” I answered, sitting at the back end of the APC, leaning against the wall with my blanket and jacket as extra cushioning again. “Healing serums work differently in that we will need to eat more to compensate for the accelerated healing, rather than the constant energy burn.”

“I need to get one of those,” She said, shaking her head. “The fact that you don’t have to worry about infection... better than anything I’ve seen so far. There is no way you would be okay right now without that.”

“About that... I think I managed to find a few of them.”

“What? “ She asked, looking at me suspiciously. “I thought you had no idea what was inside the crates?”

“Well... the truth is that this is as much of a test as it is a mission,” I admitted, stamping down the small amount of guilt I was starting to feel from lying to her. “I already fucked up with getting injured so soon... I think they noticed and decided I needed help.”

“I’m sorry, a test?” She asked, looking at me like I was crazy. “They sent you here from whatever high-tech paradise you live in as a test? That is really fucked up.”

“Yeah... you’re not wrong,” I said, looking down at my projector implant. “But I volunteered for it. I wasn’t forced or anything.”

“Well, that just makes you an idiot. Are they likely to give you more help if you fuck up more?” She asked, looking like she had an idea.

“Not likely. We got lucky with wanting something they just happened to have information on.”

She looked at me for a long moment, squinting as she studied me. I could tell she wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but after a full minute, she finally shrugged.

“Whatever, it’s a whole lot of not my problem. How do we know where they are?”

I hobbled my way over to her, sitting at the small table, facing her. I activated my map and showed her the two marked caches. For a few minutes I scrolled around the map, before eventually she just grabbed my hand and started using it to move the map around. I almost laughed at her, until it actually worked.

“Well... I’m hesitant to go after a blue just yet, especially since we have a chance to get me some healing before that,” She said after studying the projected map for a while. “I say we go after a few more greens, starting with a long trip to this one. We pick up any whites we see on the way, and if we get enough useful stuff, we go after the blue cache that has double serums.”

“I... don’t see anything wrong with that plan,” I admitted, idly wondering if the fact I was just going along with her ideas would make me less entertaining.

“Great. How long until you are ready to go out?” She asked. “I want to do some basic scaving before heading out to that one.”

“Two days, I think,” I guessed, judging from how my leg felt. “I won’t be able to really push myself, but scaving should be fine. Plus, that gives me time to get used to the strength improvement and see which of us is getting the second one.”

She winced at the mention that she might be going through the same thing I just did, but she didn’t deny that she would still do it.

“Alright, that works. I’m going to go scaving by myself tomorrow and the day after, just to see what else I can find,” She explained. “I won’t stay out for the full day because, with any luck, John will stop by before we both start heading out again. If he shows up when I’m out, just mention that he better have remembered his grandmother’s pickled beets, then tell him I’ll be back soon, probably around one or two in the afternoon.”

“Alright... is there anything you need to do around here?”

She thought to herself for a moment before smirking and nodding.

“Yeah, if you’re up for it, cut down some trees,” She said, turning and going through a crate before pulling out a metal and wood hand saw. “Cut them down with your axe before using this to cut them to size. Then split them and stack them in the pile along the back.”

After showing it off, she laid the saw against the cabinet, and I let out a resigned sigh.

“Damn, alright,” I accepted in defeat. “At least it will give me a chance to test my strength.”

“Yup, totally why I suggested it,” She responded with a chuckle. “Definitely not because it sucks, and I’m happy to pawn it off to you.”

We chatted for a bit longer as the sun started to go down, the interior of the APC getting darker and darker. Eventually, I ended up

having another can of beans and another tin of preserved meat before we both called it a night.

I managed to fall asleep after an hour or so, the dull soreness running through my whole body, and the slow pulsing ache in my leg keeping me up until my exhaustion from the serum finally took me under.

Chapter Twenty

I woke up the next morning desperately hungry. I ate just as much as I had for dinner the previous night and an additional can of preserved meat. I could tell that me eating so much of her preserved, canned food grated on Tessa. I could only hope that I would eventually make it up to her with serums and tech that would help her stay alive in this world.

When we finished eating, Tessa packed up a few things and headed out, promising to return around noon. I was once again left alone, but today I actually had some goals to accomplish. First was testing out how much my leg had healed. I struggled out of the APC, bringing my ax and Tessa's pistol with me. I spent some time lightly stretching my leg, testing how it felt and examining how the wound looked physically.

The bloody tears were still slightly swollen, and there was a near-constant ache, but it felt much better than I thought it would at this point. When I was sure I wasn't going to tear anything open just by hobbling around, I started testing out my strength. I did some sit-ups and some pull-ups on a nearby tree branch and even picked up a few heavy-looking rocks.

In the end, the change was notable but not incredible. I could definitely feel that moving and lifting things was *easier*, but it still wasn't *easy*. I was pretty sure I was just touching against what was possible if I trained myself frequently, but I wasn't anywhere strong enough to be really impressive or overly useful in a way that wasn't just convenient. If we wanted to see me benefit noticeably beyond just being baseline improved, I would have to take both serums.

About thirty minutes after Tessa left, I walked a hundred feet or so from the APC, finding a decent-sized tree. I looked it up and down, checking for anything worrying before I began the process of hacking it down. I had never cut down a tree before, never mind cutting one down with nothing but a hunk of metal on the end of a

stick, but I had seen it in old movies enough to figure out the basics. And while I had nothing to directly compare it to, it did feel more manageable than it should have.

The first tree went down in about twenty minutes, the next in fifteen, and the last two took about ten each. After that, I smacked some of the branches off the trees with my ax, using the saw for the big and stubborn ones, before dragging everything back to the APC. I took a break for an early lunch, eating another two cans of beans and a can of meat substitute before starting the process of cutting the logs into smaller chunks for splitting.

Before I could even make it through to the second tree, Tessa returned, carrying a full bag as well as a single duffel bag. She pulled something from the duffel bag and threw it at me, and I managed to catch it by dropping my ax. It was a large plastic bottle, only slightly smaller than my head.

“Protein Powder?” I asked, looking back at Tessa at reading the worn label. “What’s this for?”

“It’s supposed to be good for people putting on muscle, and it should be fortified,” She explained. “A container like that is enough for someone to live off of, as long as they vary their diet a bit. But a scoop or two with some water should keep you from eating everything we bring in.”

“And it’s still good after all this time?” I asked, turning the bottle over in my hands.

“Yeah, I checked. It smells fine, and it’s got the DMAS label on the back.”

I looked around at the bottle’s label, and sure enough, there was a tag that contained DMAS, just like there was on all of the canned food we had been eating.

“Well, that’s good. I feel bad about how much I am eating,” I admitted, unscrewing the top to find it was still sealed save a small hole, which Tessa admitted to making to smell the contents.

I helped Tessa get everything inside and sorted, adding a few cans of food to the stockpile and another duffel full of stuff to trade. Not long after we were done, Tessa brought up the serum.

“So... how are you feeling?”

“Good, the leg is healing well, and I should be able to come out with you soon,” I said, intentionally playing dumb. “I’m tempted to try and go with you tomorrow, but I think it would be better to take another day.”

“That’s not what I meant, you ass. I meant your strength!” She shot back, shaking her head. “Are you any stronger?”

Instead of answering, I only looked at her with a confused look, to which she responded by picking up her canteen and throwing it at me. I couldn’t help but chuckle when I caught it.

“I feel stronger, but it’s not anything massively game-changing,” I explained, still smiling. “It’s great, and I would definitely say next opportunity you should take one, but if we are looking to give me a noticeable advantage rather than a small boost....”

“Right, okay, that makes sense,” She agreed with a frown. “Do you think the second injection will be as bad as the first one?”

“God, I hope not,” I answered, grabbing the serum injector from one of the shelves. “Is there anything you want to do before I do this? The first one took a lot out of me, and even if this one isn’t as bad, chances are I’m still going to be useless.”

When she couldn’t think of anything, I nodded and started to set up my bed. Last time I had fallen out of the chair almost immediately, so this time I wanted to start on the ground. Trying my

best not to clench, I quickly injected my leg with the second serum and waited for the sensations and pain to roll in.

It took a bit longer, but the pain and chill spread throughout my body, spreading from the injection point until it was all I could feel. Luckily, while the pattern continued to be the same as the first time, the pain and ache definitely seemed to be scaled back. Still, when it reached my spine, I couldn't help but arch my back and shout out in pain before passing out.

Tessa was kneeling by me again when I came to, looking less worried but still diligently watching over me.

“How long?”

“No more than a few seconds,” She answered quickly, turning to one of the shelves and pulling off a large plastic glass.

“That's good. It was way less intense than before. Still sucked, though,” I explained, slowly sitting up and rubbing my arms.

My muscles were twitching and convulsing slightly, little tremors that made it hard to control myself fully. I managed to move back and lean against the far end of the APC. I watched as Tessa peeled the rest of the seal off the protein powder and used a spoon to put two scoops into the plastic glass, filling it with water and mixing it up. She handed the glass to me.

“Drink up, I'll get some normal food ready,” She said, grabbing a can opener. “Hopefully, that takes the edge off. It's supposed to be chocolate, by the way.”

I took a sip of the mixture hesitantly before finishing it off quickly. It wasn't bad, and it did taste vaguely chocolate flavored, but I wouldn't call it good. I did end up having a second one, though. When we ate, I only had the same amount as Tessa, which was a solid improvement.

“We should definitely add this stuff to the priority list,” I said when I finished my can of vegetables. “Especially if we are both going to be using more serums.”

“They are also helpful for winter if you’re still around by then,” Tessa said, laying back in her bed with a huff.

“How long until winter?”

“Eight or nine months.”

“I don’t think so, then. I’m heading back in six months,” I answered. “Assuming I survive that long.”

“Considering we will be spending a lot of that time together, I hope you do,” She responded with a scoff.

We chatted for a bit longer before Tessa eventually pulled out a worn book, and I laid back in my simple, barely functional bed. I hadn’t intended to sleep, but by then, the dull ache from the strength serum had almost faded, as did the ache in my leg. All that was left was the exhaustion and fatigue from the second serum and the workout from cutting down the firewood. I fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning, I woke up hungry but feeling good. The lightness and ease of movement I had barely noticed the day before was even stronger now, easily noticeable. My leg also felt and looked better, with the swelling almost completely faded and tears and punctures healing well. As long as I kept it slow, it would be okay to do some light scaving soon.

Tessa was already gone from the APC when I woke up, but I heard her moving around outside when I pushed open the hatch.

“Stay inside the APC, please,” She said sternly. “I’m showering, and if you try and take a peak, I will shoot you.”

Not doubting her claim for a second, I quickly shut the hatch and went back inside, eating my breakfast and two protein shakes before waiting for her to give me the all-clear, which she did a few minutes later by thumping on the side of the APC. She was hanging her wet clothes from a tree when I climbed out.

“There is still water in the shower. I suggest you clean up,” She said when she was done, already getting ready to leave. “There are some clothes that should fit you in the green duffel, so you can wash what you’re wearing too.”

With that, she headed out, leaving me alone once again. Instead of taking a shower immediately, I went through the same routine I had before, testing my strength in several ways.

The difference was even more noticeable than before. Push-ups and sit-ups, while still requiring effort, were easy, as were the pull-ups. In fact, I could even do a pull-up one-handed. It was hard to strictly judge how much stronger I was, especially in a broad sense, but it was definitely a significant improvement from my base levels of strength.

The ax felt incredibly light, enough so that I started to get worried that I would break it while I was cutting down another tree. Dragging that tree back to camp was more manageable as well. I couldn’t help but smile as I realized this would be an incredible advantage when picking up new crates and facing the various threats waiting for Tessa and me.

I spent a few hours making firewood, turning three whole trees into split wood, and adding to the existing pile along the back end of the APC. When I felt like I had contributed enough, I finally showered and washed my clothes.

Taking a shower, even a barely lukewarm one with limited water and a cudgeled-together control method, felt absolutely amazing. Tessa had rigged a large pot for the water up in a tree, a

simple pipe system attached to it to work as a shower. It must have been a pain to refill, but it was definitely worth it.

With the stress of the last few days, I hadn't realized how dirty I felt until it was all washing off of me. I resolved to figure out a way to have these more often, even if I had to get the extra water myself.

When I felt clean and had changed into the salvaged clothes, I pulled myself back on top of the APC to wait for Tessa to return. I had her pistol sitting next to me on the worn and slightly rusty roof of the armored vehicle, scanning the woods for anything dangerous.

Just when I was starting to get seriously bored, I heard a solid knocking sound coming from a substantial distance away, directly in front of me. It was out of visual range, the source hidden by the trees and underbrush. I leaned over and grabbed my axe but stayed where I was, scanning the area. After a few seconds, I heard the knocking again, this time even closer.

I cursed under my breath, my heart rate picking up. I gripped the axe tightly, wondering what was making that noise and debating if I should just climb inside and seal myself in. Before I could make up my mind, the choice was made for me as the sound of crunching leaves and footsteps reached my ears. A middle-aged man dressed in leather armor and cargo shorts came into view through the underbrush. He continued to get closer until he spotted me, which was when he froze, his hand sliding down to his hip where he had some sort of firearm holstered.

He was carrying a massive pack on his back and had a well-made, metal-tipped spear in his hand.

"Who the fuck are you?" He asked, scowling at me, his hand wrapping around the grip of his pistol. "Where the fuck is Tessa?"

"Uh, hi, you must be John," I responded. "My name is Leon. I've been working with Tessa the past few days...."

He stared at me, eyes not leaving me for a second. I slowly raised my hand away from Tessa's pistol to show I wasn't going to shoot at him.

"Uh... Tessa is going to be back in... well, any time now... She said... you'd better have brought some of your grandmothers... Pickles? No, wait, pickled beets!"

I mentally fumbled for a second, trying to remember what she had said I should tell him. For a long few seconds, he didn't react before finally pulling his hand off his gun.

"Well, that's good enough not to shoot you, but I'm going to wait nearby and out of sight for her to return. Tell her to whistle when she does."

Before I could say anything, he took a dozen or so steps back before breaking my line of sight behind a massive tree, lugging his huge pack back into the trees and underbrush. After a few seconds of silence, I let out a long, tense breath.

"That could have gone worse," I mumbled before cracking open the hatch and crawling back inside.

Chapter Twenty-One

I waited anxiously inside the APC for Tessa to come back. Not only was John the first human I had seen here other than Tessa, but I also wasn't entirely sure how to treat him. Tessa didn't have a lot of nice things to say about her old village.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long, as Tessa slapped the side of the APC about a half-hour later, prompting me to pop the hatch and peek out, only pulling myself entirely out of the hatch when I spotted her. I looked around the clearing, and she noticed my hesitation.

"What's up?" She asked, standing up straight from going through one of the bags she had brought back.

"Your friend John stopped by," I explained. "He knocked on the trees, scared the shit out of me, and said he would be waiting out of sight. Said you could whistle for him."

She tensed up when I mentioned someone was there but relaxed when I mentioned the whistling.

"That's early. Alright, let me sort through this again. Get the bags we set aside so we can get this over with."

I climbed back down inside the APC and quickly carried the bags of looted goods we had gathered the last two times we had gone scavenging. In total, there were two bags of scavenged stuff, some of it from before I arrived and some from our trips. There was a third, partially filled bag from the last two days of Tessa scavenging alone. I passed the bags down to her before taking the bag she had just brought back, as well as her mostly full backpack.

When we were done, I climbed back on top of the APC, sitting on the edge with my feet hanging over it. I kept my ax with me, sitting just out of sight behind an armored panel. Tessa's pistol

was gone, now sitting in her holster. Her new bow, which she had taken with her, was resting on the tattered and flat remains of one of the APC's tires.

I gave Tessa a once over, noting just how tense she was. Her shoulders were set, and she quickly checked and then double-checked that her pistol was not only where it was supposed to be but that it was visible. She turned to look at me, and I nodded as supportively as possible. She nodded wordlessly after a moment before putting her fingers in her mouth and blowing, a shockingly loud whistle echoing through the small clearing.

"Damn, that was loud," I said with a wince. "I've never been able to do that."

"It's not that hard," She said with a shrug, her eyes focused on the tree line.

A minute later, John returned. He eyed me for a minute before walking further into the clearing, stopping about fifteen feet away.

"Got yourself a friend, ay Tessa?" He asked with thinly veiled distaste. "He an exile like you? He know what you did?"

"That's not really any of your business, but he is a traveler," She explained. "He's hanging around for now, but he won't be sticking around forever. And yes, I told him what really happened."

For a long moment, I thought he would push for more, clearly not trusting her to have told me correctly or at all. After a few seconds, he just shook his head. Before I could open my mouth to tell him to mind his own business, he rolled his eyes.

"Whatever, I don't really care, as long as he knows there's blood on your hands," He responded with a shrug. "So what did you manage to haul in this time?"

The two started to go over their trade, with John shrugging off his pack and showing off what he had brought, Tessa doing the same. Eventually, after about thirty minutes of bartering, they settled on a final deal. In exchange for everything we had, he would give us five pounds of mystery game meat, half of it salt-cured and the other smoked. On top of that, he offered us an assortment of pickled vegetables and some fresh produce. Tessa actually smiled when he handed over a large jar of pickled beets.

“Thanks, John,” She said as he started packing his newly acquired goods. “And tell your Grandmother I said thank you as well.”

He simply nodded and threw his pack over his shoulder. When he was fully packed, he silently made his way out of the clearing. Tessa watched him leave for a few minutes, seemingly much longer than necessary, before turning to me.

“C’mon, let’s get everything inside.”

We spent twenty minutes getting everything into the APC and in their proper places. Moving around glass jars was a little nerve-racking, but the sealed plastic packages of dried, smoked, and salted meat were surprisingly airtight.

“How the hell did they seal it so well?” I asked as we finished putting it all away.

“Huh? Oh, I think they dunk the bag in water or something?” She said, looking over her shoulder for a moment before turning back to focus on what she was doing. “They have some solar panels they use to power a few vacuum pumps occasionally, but that’s really only done when they have a lot of meat coming in at once. The rest of the time, it’s all by hand.”

I nodded, and before long, we were done getting everything stored away. As we sat down, myself at the back end of the APC and Tessa at the front on the edge of her sleeping space, I wondered if I

should ask about what had made her so tense. It really wasn't my business, but Tessa had been a friend so far, and I wanted to know what upset her so much. Before I could make up my mind, she made it for me.

"Alright, c'mon, I can see you struggling," She said, crossing her arms and looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "Don't hurt yourself. Just ask."

"Why were you so tense about that?" I asked.

"Calling John my friend is a bit of a stretch," She explained, shrugging and looking up through the thick window above the far end of her sleeping area. "He does this for two reasons. He gets a substantial cut for what I find, as in he charges me way too much, and because his grandmother asks him to. He doesn't particularly like me, and he definitely believes the bullshit version of what happened that the mayor spread."

"Bullshit version?"

"... the mayor came up with this bullshit claim that I had been seducing his son for months, teasing him and baiting him so I could take advantage of him since he was the mayor's son." She explained, laying back on her bed, her voice cold and tight with anger and frustration. "He said I killed him when his son finally realized I was trying to take advantage of him."

"That is all sorts of fucked up...They all just bought that?"

"Not everyone, plenty of people knew that it was bullshit, but they were either too scared to say anything or thought I had gone too far, so I deserved the punishment anyway," She explained. "Anyway, John probably thinks you're my next victim or something."

"Why haven't you traveled to another town?" I asked. "You said yours was the closest, but there must be others?"

“At first, it was stubbornness,” She said with a shrug. “I was angry and determined to prove that I could make it alone, without anyone. About a year in, and... I gave up, not having people around....”

I could see her struggling to put it into words. I stayed silent, though, not wanting to interrupt her.

“I needed people. I could feel myself unraveling,” She finally admitted. “But they figured out who I was within fifteen minutes of me showing up. It turns out the mayor decided to screw me over by spreading his version of my story to anyone trader who would listen.”

“And they believed him? Without any proof?”

“Proof? Leon, I know where ever the fuck you came from must be different, but who the fuck cares about proof? I can’t even blame them. I wasn’t worth the risk,” She said with a shrug. “If I showed up missing a limb or dying from starvation, most of them would probably take pity on me and help for a bit, but barring that....”

I couldn’t help but shake my head as we sat in silence. To get screwed over like that, and everyone assumes the rumors were true? It hit close to home in a way that dug up old frustrations.

“I believe you, Tessa,” I said, breaking the silence. “You helped me when you didn’t have to, even before you knew about the tech caches. Even with those... You didn’t have to agree to help.”

Tessa, still lying back on her bed, looking up through the window, let out a wet chuckle and sniffed.

“Leon, you were the first human I had seen in three months, coming off of a very long and lonely winter,” She explained. “I thought you were crazy. I wasn’t completely sure you weren’t until I found out these work.”

She tapped her face, and from my angle, I could just barely tell she was tapping her glasses.

“But I didn’t care because if you depended on me to show you around, that meant you would stick around. An actual person to talk to.”

We were quiet for a while, silently stewing on our own issues. Eventually, Tessa sat up and slid to the edge of her bed again, her face a little red. She rubbed her eyes briefly before sniffing again and shaking her head.

“So, how do you feel? Stronger?” She asked, blatantly changing the subject. “Is it a big difference?”

“Yes, I can definitely tell. I think I’m definitely toeing the line of what a person could normally do. Just look.”

I reached up and grabbed one of the many bars welded to the roof of the APC as handholds. With a slight strain, I lifted myself off the ground with one hand and did seven or eight one-handed lifts. When I put myself back down, I couldn’t help but smirk.

“Not bad, right?” I asked, getting a shocked look from Tessa. “It’s hard to judge because it’s not just a ten or twenty percent increase. But it is very noticeable, in some places more than others.”

I raised my shirt and showed off my stomach, which now had well-defined abs. It wasn’t grotesque or overly defined, but my whole body looked like I had invested a lot of effort into ensuring I was as strong as possible.

“Two days and two injections, and I look like a pro athlete. Not bad trade, huh?”

“Not bad. I assume you didn’t have those before?”

“No, not even close.”

After a bit of chatting, I brought up our plans for the next day.

“How’s your leg?” She asked.

“It’s good. As long as we keep it light, I should be fine,” I said, pulling my pants up to show off the steadily healing wound. “Maybe two more days, and I’ll be ready for whatever the green caches can throw at us.”

“Alright... Tomorrow we can go somewhere easy. Another neighborhood, one close by,” She said, and I nodded in agreement. “No reason to grab everything, just the stuff that we need. John won’t be ready for another trade-off for a month at least, so there’s no point in building up extra stuff yet.”

“Alright, that sounds good. We should grab any white cases, and probably the green ones too.”

“White, sure, green is going to be on a case-by-case basis until you’re fully healed,” She said, holding off my complaints with a hand. “Green caches seem to be more involved and actively dangerous. What happens when we screw up and we have to run from something really dangerous?”

I let out an annoyed sigh but nodded. It was annoying to be the one holding us back, but I had to focus on the fact that she was the one who had experience in this hell hole and that, for the most part, she knew what she was doing.

“Fine, yeah, fair enough.”

“We should do two days of that. Then, we can head out to the green cache with the healing serum.”

As we talked, I made myself another protein shake, still feeling the increased hunger from taking multiple serums. I was tempted to go back outside to work on more wood chopping, but I would have only had an hour or so before the sun started to go

down. So we both relaxed for the second half of the day, eventually having dinner.

I had already completely forgotten about the fresh vegetable we had traded for, which made dinner exciting. We ended up having smoked meat jerky and a heavy salad with cucumbers and tomatoes, topped with sweet pickled beets, using some of the pickling liquid as dressing. It was shocking how good it tasted, most likely because I hadn't eaten anything fresh since leaving home. I ended up finishing it with an additional half-serving of a protein shake.

It didn't take long for both of us to feel sleepy after the large fresh meal. As I was putting together my bed, Tessa sat at the edge of hers.

"Do you have family?" She asked. "Back at sci-fi land?"

"... I do," I answered after a moment. "Two younger siblings, one of each, and an older sister. And my mom. What about you?"

"Dad still lives in the village, Mom died before I was exiled," She responded, shaking her head. "Haven't seen him in a while. What did your family think about you coming here?"

"Well... volunteering to do this means they are doing much better than before. My sister was sick... she got the medicine she needed to live, and my brother, who is way smarter than me, will get a real education." I explained as vaguely as possible. "Coming here wasn't my first choice, but it wasn't hard to accept once I had no other choice. Plus, their living conditions will only improve if I keep doing well."

"They aren't going to get mad because you got injured, and I had to help you out, are they?" She asked, her eyebrow raised.

The guilt for not explaining rose up again. I stamped it down by reminding myself that I hadn't known her for very long and that if

we kept working together, I would eventually tell her.

“No, I think they were just worried about my progress if I spent most of my time injured,” I explained with a shrug.

“Right... well, alright.” She said, dropping the question for now. “I think we should head to bed early. The earlier start we can get, the less likely we are to run into any trouble.”

I nodded in agreement and finished putting together my, laying down on the now familiar hard floor.

“We seriously need to find some bedding for me,” I said with a groan, Tessa laughing in response.

Both of us fell asleep without much trouble.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next two days were spent scavenging, with plenty of time to let my leg recover in between. While I knew it was necessary to heal completely before going off and hunting down the more dangerous caches, I still was anxious about how boring it would be to watch me and Tessa do basically the same thing for so long, especially if we spent the rest of the day doing nothing. We would leave early in the morning, head out to a new area of the town and work our way through as many houses as we could before noon. We would then make our way back, organize our loot and spend the rest of the day taking it easy.

I tried my best to compensate, experimenting with my new enhanced strength as often as possible, doing my best to get used to the ins and outs of what I was now capable of. Unfortunately, the days were still worryingly similar, save for the light rain we got at the end of the first day of scavenging.

After two days of experimenting, it was obvious that the second serum had firmly placed me at the peak level of human strength, as if I had practiced and trained every day. In some ways, that meant I was weaker than I had expected, and in others, that meant I was stronger than I would have expected. On the first day of looting, I pulled the door handle straight off of a locked front door and bent a steel metal rod that had been used to brace a cellar bulkhead shut. But not five minutes later, I struggled to move a large fridge used to barricade a door.

Ultimately, I decided my confusion was because I hadn't known what to expect and had filled in the blanks with what I reasonably *thought* would happen. Some of that was accurate, some of it I was overestimating, and others parts I was underestimating. I was clearly also missing the finer details of being strong as well. I had been enhanced, but I had no knowledge of how to use it. I would struggle to do something, trying to brute force it with my strength,

only to realize that a quick change in how I was attacking the problem turned it into an easy fix.

Basically, I was stronger than I could have ever hoped to be, but I had no idea how to throw it around.

To fix that, I shifted my experimenting to practice, which basically just meant paying more attention as I moved around, swung my ax, lifted things, and put them down while we were scavenging. By the end of the second day, I was reasonably confident I knew my body and its capabilities well enough that I wouldn't get myself killed because I overextended or did something stupid.

After getting back and settling down on the second day, we went over the plan for the next green cache, the first healing serum for Tessa. Because of how far away it was, we decided to forgo scavenging on the trip. Instead, we would take a slightly longer route there and come directly home on the way back. That way, we covered twice as much ground, driving up the likelihood that we would stumble on more white or green caches.

We also spent our downtime fixing up our gear. I found a new basic wardrobe on the first day back, but my jacket wasn't replaceable. Tessa, who had some skill at sewing, managed to repair the holes the skelly-wolf had made in the sleeve of my jacket, though she struggled to get the needle through the cloth. She gently used a small hammer to drive the needle through for each stitch. This meant she was restringing her needle frequently while it was embedded in the sleeve, but she managed to close up the holes and hopefully prevent them from getting any worse.

While she was doing that, I sharpened my axe, bringing it to a stout but sharp edge, before sharpening Tessa's machete. Apparently, she hadn't done that a single time since she traded for it a year or so ago.

With prep more or less done, we enjoyed another meal of fresh veg and real dried meat before heading to bed even earlier

than before. We had a much longer walk than before, and the more time we spent in the early morning, the better.

The sun was just starting to light trees when we got up the following day. It was early enough that Tessa decided to wait inside for a while to let the sunrise a bit more before we left. The trip there would probably take three and a half hours, while the walk back would take two hours.

We had been walking for an hour when I spotted a white crate nearby, prompting us to take a short detour. Thankfully it didn't take long, as we couldn't really afford any lengthy delays. The chest was wedged into the branch of a tree... that had half fallen over a relatively fast-moving river.

After a short debate, Tessa started to climb the tree, but not before she tied a length of strong rope she called paracord to her belt, handing the other end to me. She climbed the tree relatively quickly since it was already bent at an angle.

Once she managed to snag the crate and come back, we opened it to find... a half-gallon canteen inside. At first, we were disappointed, but after I scanned it, we realized it would slowly chill any liquid stored inside. Tessa tried to claim it, but I just shook my head.

"Neither of us are claiming it. We will fill it up before we leave to scav. I'll carry it'-" I explained, raising my hand to keep her from complaining. "I will carry it, and when we take a break, we will pour half into each of our canteens."

"Oh... yeah, that's a much better idea," She admitted. "But you are leaving that here when you go back home."

We returned to our journey, making good progress on our roundabout path. We had left the more populated areas of the town behind about twenty minutes after the white briefcase, so now we were walking along a mostly empty road. Tessa was clearly nervous about being in a wooded area, but she admitted that it was early

enough that it wasn't overly dangerous. As we walked, we constantly had to walk around rusted-out and broken-down cars and climb over quite a few fallen trees.

"I would have said finding a working car would be amazing, but it wouldn't do you much good, would it?" I asked idly, walking by a car that was burnt out and barely identifiable but was blocking most of the road.

"I doubt there are any working cars left at this point," Tessa said with a shrug. "I don't know the first thing about them, but I've never seen or heard of anyone driving them around in my lifetime. The closest thing would be people tearing them apart to make carts and to salvage metal."

I nodded in understanding, internally missing my cycle. It would be straightforward to carry it around the obstacles that blocked the road. The only issue would be recharging it, which this Earth was obviously incapable of. For my next trip, maybe I could convince them that giving me reliable transportation would make things more exciting.

We kept walking, occasionally making small talk but mostly keeping quiet. Tessa was trying to hide it, but I could tell she was on edge about being in an area she wasn't familiar with. About two hours in, we stopped to take a break, savoring the cold water from our new canteen.

"Holy fuck... that is amazing," Tessa said after taking a long sip, looking down into her bottle. "I've never had cold water this long after winter was over. If the wrong people knew we had this, they would kill us with a smile on their faces."

I was silent for a while, though internally deciding I would leave as much of the equipment as possible for Tessa when I left. After all, they were probably going to take back most of it, and since she was helping me get it, she deserved to keep whatever she could

use. I shook my head and focused on what she had said, frowning slightly.

“Does that happen a lot?” I asked. “People killing and stealing from each other?”

“Of course it does. You think the end of the world somehow turned us into saints?” She asked, laughing darkly. “The savager clans I mentioned before, they are by far the worst, but meeting anyone else out here would be tense at best. Most big groups wouldn’t think twice about demanding some or all of our stuff in exchange for letting us go.”

“That... kinda wish you had told me that earlier.”

She shrugged, and I considered asking her if she had ever run into a group like she described. After a moment I shook my head because it wasn’t really important. If she had, she clearly came out on top or figured out how to escape.

We spent another ten minutes resting, having a quick lunch, and recovering before heading out again. We were getting closer and closer to our destination, but there was still no sign of any town nearby.

When we were basically right on top of it, the trees cleared to reveal a large office building surrounded by a mostly empty parking lot. It wasn’t anything fancy, a large rectangular building built from concrete, with black tinted windows on every floor wrapped around the corner closest to us but stopped at the end of each surface. Most of the glass was broken, and the rest of the structure was dark with dirt and grime.

We slowly made our way closer, stopping at the far edges of the parking lot to hide behind one of the few broken-down vehicles that were scattered around.

“Any ideas?” I asked as Tessa looked over the car’s hood, scanning the building.

“Really? I just got here too, you know,” She shot back, but with very little heat.

She tapped her glasses and leaned forward slightly, moving her head much slower as she looked into the building itself, focusing on the broken windows. After a few minutes, she cursed softly, turning and sitting with her back against the wall.

“Alright, the good news is, I know what’s dangerous about this location. Bad news, I wish I didn’t.” She said, talking even softer than before. “It’s a screamer nest. You’ve heard them from a distance before, but basically, they are flying bastards the size of an old-world cat. They nest in large, open, dark places like the inside of an abandoned building. They are one of the reasons going out at night is dangerous. One will bite and bleed you, and then you get swarmed by them. Death by a thousand nibbles. A building this large... Well, I saw three groups in the broken windows, so I have to assume there are even more.”

“So, how do we get the cache?” I asked, lowering my voice as much as she had. “There has to be some way, right?”

“Oh, you could walk right in and grab it,” She explained. “As long as you didn’t make any noise the entire time. They are super sensitive to noise. Anything too loud and you’ll wake one, and if you wake one....”

“It screams?” I guessed. “And wakes the rest of them up.”

“Pretty much,” She responded, shaking her head. “At night, you might get screwed by a few dozen, but in a building like that? There might be hundreds, maybe thousands of them.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

After explaining what we were facing, Tessa started to pull off her backpack, her canteen, and her holster, prompting me to do the same. She left her machete on her hip after double-checking it was firmly attached.

“The fewer things we have to worry about, the better.” She explained, sliding her stuff under the car. “The last thing we need is to make it through to the cache only to turn and knock something over with our packs.”

Once we were both divested of the various things we wouldn't need, we started creeping closer. We stopped about a hundred feet from the building, crouching by another car. This time Tessa leaned in to whisper directly into my ear.

“I've never actually seen these things while they are sleeping,” She admitted. “I've only heard of their swarming through stories. I don't actually know how loud a sound will wake them up. But in the story, I heard it was a sneeze that did it. If we wake them up, protect your eyes and run towards the nearest exit. It's bright enough outside that they won't want to follow us. If they do anyway, try and get into a car.”

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up, and we both stood and silently made our way inside. The front doors into the building were both shattered, making our entrance easier but more hazardous at the same time, as glass covered the ground like a shiny minefield. As gingerly and slowly as possible, we stepped through the broken glass, both of us wincing every time the glass shifted, cracked, or ground against itself.

When we finally stepped into the building proper, the smell hit us like a physical wave, searing my nostrils. The stench of ammonia and rot seemed to dig into my nasal passage like claws. I could see Tessa struggling as well.

After a minute of working through the odorous assault, we started making our way through the building, eventually spotting the first cluster of screamers. They were bigger than I expected, with all-black fur, prominent ears, and a flat, featureless face. As far as I could tell, they had no eyes at all, and their nose seemed to barely be a thing. They were latched onto the ceiling of the office space, hanging down from it by large, glinting claws, visible even in the relative darkness. I pointed them out to Tessa, who nodded in acknowledgment. We slowly walked across the office floor to the emergency staircase, pausing by the door into the stairwell.

Carefully, slowly, I pulled the door open, ready to stop the second it squeaked or complained about being opened for the first time in probably close to seventy-five years. When it swung open with barely a sound, I stepped into the stairwell, looking up and around. Luckily this area seemed clear of screamers.

Tessa stepped in after me, jamming the door open quietly with a nearby chunk of debris. Together we climbed the stairs, my map open as we made our way to the second floor, then the third. This was where we ran into our first problem.

I pushed against the door that led onto the third floor, which, according to my map, was where the cache was. Unfortunately, something was jamming the door from the other side. It had some give but could only open by a half inch. I stopped pushing when I started to feel the entire door strain against the pressure I was putting it under.

I turned to look at Tessa, who was looking around, chewing her lip. Eventually, she gestured to the stairs, gesturing that we should go up another flight and come down from somewhere else.

I looked through the door's window, trying to see what prevented me from opening it easily. I quickly spotted the issue, it was some kind of security bar that had been locked in place on the other side. I probably could have forced it open, but there was no

hope of that being quiet. Instead, I turned back to Tessa and nodded in agreement.

With Tessa in the lead, we started up the next set of stairs, this time quickly stepping out onto the fourth and final floor. The door opened smoothly and shut behind us quietly, leaving us with a half dozen clusters of sightless mutants. Tessa and I shared a look before I took the lead, heading to the other stairwell, this one on the other side of the building.

We crossed a large office space, a few break rooms, and a handful of other rooms, all of them wrecked, rotting, and covered in what I quickly realized was screamer shit. By now, my lungs were starting to burn from the increasingly noxious stench. I got Tessa's attention, tapped my wrist, and spun my finger vertically in a circle. We were on a time limit now, as I could only imagine what breathing this in for too long would do to us.

We were approaching the second stairwell when Tessa turned and slipped on a pooled of questionable liquid, her foot sliding out from under her. Thankfully she fell towards me, and I was able to catch her. Unfortunately, she instinctively started to curse, barely stopping herself from letting out more than a whisper. We both froze, her leaning against me as we scanned around us. The three visible groups of screamers shifted slightly, disturbed by the sound but eventually settling back down.

Both of us let out the breaths we were holding and continued our journey, stepping into the second stairwell. This one was as undisturbed as the first, and we both breathed a sigh of relief. Tessa patted my shoulder and mouthed her thanks for the save, and I nodded in return before we started to descend.

The door to the third floor was thankfully unblocked, letting us push inside. We stopped for a moment to check the map, the cache on the opposite side, close to the first stairwell. After studying our surroundings for a moment, we nodded to each other and started making our way to our goal, still avoiding the several noticeable

groups of screamers. When we were about ten meters from the cache, we spotted it, a small green case covered in screamer shit, directly under the largest group of them we had seen yet.

We looked at each other, and Tessa started to move forward, but I grabbed her arm and shook my head. I pointed towards the blocked door to the stairs, the one we had initially tried to enter through. Once I had her attention, I mimed her kicking it open before pointing to myself and miming that I would jump through. She seemed reluctant but, after a moment, she nodded in agreement.

I watched her walk away, stopping by the doorway and inspecting the security bar that had prevented us from getting inside. Sure that she would figure it out, I turned back to the massive group of screamers and the prize that was resting under them. Resisting the urge to take a deep breath, I started walking toward them, taking my time and watching my steps.

As I was getting closer, I could finally make out the individual creatures. They were clearly once some sort of bat, though they dwarfed any species I knew of from home. They shifted minutely in their sleep, which I hoped was normal and not a sign of waking up or being agitated. Focusing downward on my steps, I crossed the final distance.

The container was smaller than the blue crate that the strength serums had been inside, but that was to be expected since there should only be a single vial in this one. I picked up the container, ignoring the disquieting coverage of rot and feces that covered it.

Giving one last look around, I started the walk back to Tessa, who had already unjammed the door and was now holding it open for me. With our goal in my hands, my heart was racing, and my adrenaline was pumping, but I struggled to stay at the same pace, checking myself to keep from making any noise. When I finally got back into the stairwell, I felt like I was going to pass out.

I handed the container to Tessa, who accepted it with a wince while I leaned on the handrail of the stairs, trying to get my heart to stop slamming into my chest.

After a minute or so, I felt better, though my lungs were still burning. I pushed up off the railing and nodded to Tessa, who turned and started making her way down the stairs. I followed behind, eyes still peeled.

Getting out was almost more stressful than getting in, as we were both clearly fighting the urge to just run out of the building, encouraged dramatically by the adrenaline and the torture our lungs were going through. Still, we made it out without waking up the screamers, walking out the front door and across the parking lot, only stopping when we reached the first car we had taken cover behind. Wordlessly we sat down on the ground, enjoying the clean air.

“That... That went better than it had any right to,” Tessa said when we had both recovered fully. “I was certain....”

“That we would be booking it out at the end?” I finished, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, same here.”

Another minute or two, and we both started to get our stuff together, pulling it out from under the car and strapping everything back on, swinging our packs back on our shoulders last. When we were both ready, Tessa grabbed the still gross container, and we left, back along the same empty street.

It took us a while, but eventually, we broke away from the similar path, heading down a new one that led home on a much more direct route. It wasn't long before the dark clouds opened up, first as a light drizzle, slowly turning into heavy rain. We picked up the pace and eventually stumbled upon an isolated house, both of us heading inside to get out of the downpour.

Tessa quickly searched the house for something to clean our prize with, eventually finding a pile of relatively clean towels tucked away in the kitchen. She quickly cleaned the box, wiping away as much of the rot and shit as best as she could, eventually giving up and passing the container to me.

“So what kind of hell am I looking at here,” She asked, rubbing her hands together nervously. “Should we even do it here? Maybe we should wait until we get back?”

“The healing serum wasn’t anything like the strength one,” I assured her, running my arm over the case, the seal breaking with a familiar hiss. “It hurts for a bit, and there’s a really hot sensation, but that spreads out quickly. You should be fine. I got mine less than ten minutes before... Before I left.”

I verbally stumbled for a moment, hesitating just enough that I’m sure she picked up on it. I cracked the case open along the seam and laid it out on the counter, dirty side down, obviously. I pulled my canteen out and splashed some water over my hands to clean them up, gesturing Tessa to do the same. When we were finished, I picked the serum up and led Tessa to the living room, gesturing for her to sit down.

She was clearly still nervous, but my explanation helped her calm down. She took a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it go. As she calmed herself down, I knelt beside her. She took another breath before nodding to me, and I pressed the injector against her leg and activated it. The injection happened in a moment, a slight hiss coming from the injector, which I had apparently missed from my own injections.

“Oohhhh wow, that... that’s weird. It’s already fading into warmth...” She said as the tension she had been holding slowly relaxed. “That wasn’t bad at all.”

I stood up and sat on a smaller loveseat next to the couch she was sitting on, watching her closely. She shifted slightly, letting

out a deep breath again before opening her eyes and looking at me, noticing that I was watching her so closely. I was surprised to see her flush slightly, shaking her head and getting to her feet.

“So, that’s it then?” She asked, stretching. “I’m immune to infections? I won’t bleed out from arterial bleeds?”

“In general, but it’s not magic. Get hurt enough, and it won’t help much,” I reminded her before smiling. “As for getting infections, yes. Congrats, you are no longer at risk of dying from a hangnail.”

She seemed to sag a bit before taking a breath and standing up straighter. I could almost see a massive weight slide off her shoulders and slam into the floor. She looked at me, stepped closer, and reached out, giving me a tight hug.

“Thank you.” She said, pulling back and putting her hand on my shoulder. “This... This is something... I never told you this, but my mom died from an infection. Just a little cut on her arm and... Watching her waste away was... Well, it fueled more than a few nightmares.”

“I’m glad I can help you with that,” I said, patting her hand and giving it a squeeze. “You went out on a limb and helped me survive. I don’t think I would have even made it out of that city if you hadn’t been running by.”

She chuckled and nodded before stepping away, looking around the living room we had taken shelter in.

“We should stay out of the pouring rain, even if neither of us can really catch a cold anymore,” She said, smiling at her newfound constitution “No reason to be miserable. Let’s wait for it to die down a bit, maybe an hour? If it doesn’t, we will have to tough it out.”

“Well... Let’s go through the house then?” I suggested, Tessa, nodding in agreement.

We spent the next thirty or forty minutes searching the house, grabbing a couple of cans of food and a bag of preserved dried fruit. We ate the sugary, dried fruit while waiting for the rain to let up, leaving once it turned into a light drizzle.

Chapter Twenty-Four

We made our way home, hidden under the partially tattered umbrella that Tessa had found as we walked out of our temporary shelter. Even if one side leaked, it was better than nothing, and it was interesting to see the namesake of the water-repellent energy fields that my Earth called umbrella hats.

Originally, we had planned to take our time on the way home, scanning for any hidden caches and looting the occasional house. Unfortunately, by the time we left our temporary shelter, it was starting to get late into the afternoon. I could *feel* Tessa's rising nervousness about being out too late.

We kept up a faster-than-normal pace, following my map and heading directly home. We were about an hour away when Tessa stopped and looked around.

"Do you hear that?" She asked, looking around nervously.

"...No I-"

Before I could finish, I noticed rhythmic, sharp thumping coming from close by. I was about to comment when Tessa grabbed my hand and pulled me off the road we were traveling on, pulling me into a tall bush. Before I could curse, she put her hand over my mouth and gestured for me to be silent. I nodded, and she pulled her hand off of my mouth, turning to peer out of the bush. A few seconds passed, and the rhythmic thumping got closer, eventually going past our hiding spot.

A horse, or what was vaguely reminiscent of a horse, slowly clopped by our hiding spot. It was almost entirely black, with hints of dark red lines of corruption around its legs and undercarriage. Its musculature was incredibly defined, making the beast look somewhere between starvation and muscular beyond what a normal

horse could hope for. The most terrifying difference, however, was the lethal-looking teeth and fangs sticking out of its mouth.

Even more worrying was who sat on the back of the mutated horse, sitting in a crude saddle. A human man, dressed in rags, armed with a brutal-looking machete on his back that looked like it was cobbled together from scraps, as well as what looked like a crossbow in his hands. He was looking around, his head on a swivel.

His skin was a rather disturbing shade of purple, and his head was completely bald, with a large growth running down his scalp and neck.

Slowly they walked past, heading further down the road, eventually disappearing around the corner.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked, keeping my voice as quiet as I could.

“Savager,” She explained, shaking her head. “Haven’t seen one in a while. They don’t usually scout around here....”

“What was up with his skin?” I asked. “And what the hell was that horse?”

“I warned you that they were corrupted. That’s the kind of thing that eating mutant meat will do to you,” She explained with a shrug. “There was a guy in town who had naturally growing green hair, and that’s just from eating some during winter to keep from starving to death. That’s what you get when you eat it constantly. And the horse was a carrion colt. A carnivorous horse.”

I was shocked by the revelation and wordlessly followed Tessa as she stepped out of the thick bush we were hiding in, looking up and down the road. After double checking it was empty, we slowly made our way down the street, keeping our eyes peeled. When we reached the road where the savager had gone left, we

went straight. We quickly picked up our pace, rushing out of his range.

“What happens if they find the APC?” I ask quietly, both of us still worried about being found.

“If that one guy finds it, or the group he is probably traveling with does?” She asked. “Cause if he does, we kill him, pack up as much shit as we can carry, and leave. Quickly.”

“And if their group does?”

“We do our best to survive,” She said as if it was simple. “Sometimes they let people join them, but... the initiation isn’t fun. Not for people who have a conscience, at least.”

We arrived home about forty-five minutes later. We quickly climbed in and locked the hatch up, sealing ourselves inside.

It took a few minutes to calm down, adrenaline and nervous energy fading now that we were relatively safe. Eventually, we sat down to have dinner, eating the last bit of fresh vegetables, leaving us with just the “fresh” preserved food. Our anxiety bled out even more as we ate, the food doing well to lift our spirits. When we were done eating, and I was done with my protein shake, we sat down to discuss our next trip out.

“We need to spend a few days scaving,” I suggested, Tessa nodding in agreement. “Chances are we will both need more and more food as we improve ourselves, so it’s probably best we don’t put it off.”

“I was going to suggest that anyway. I say we spend two days scaving in the opposite direction of where the scout was.”

“And then we head out to the blue cache.”

“About that. I think it would be better to make this a multi-day trip,” Tessa suggested. “Let me see your map.”

I held out my arm and activated the projected map, holding it out so we could both see it. Tessa surprised me by grabbing my other hand and using it to manipulate the map as she wanted.

“So this is going to be an even further trip, and between having to slow down for the actual crate, pauses for breaks, and to find places to sleep for the night, we need to give ourselves as much extra time as possible. This will bring us firmly out of the city’s protection, so it’s going to be dangerous,” Tessa pointed out, pointing at a revealed green crate in the same general direction as the distant blue crate. “I say we make our way here, keeping an eye out for somewhere safe to stay for the night. If we find anything suitable at or near this cache, we will stay there overnight and head out to the blue cache early in the morning. If we can’t find anything, we can shift to a different route, maybe going around this way.”

As she talked, she circled around the green marker before drawing out a much wider path to the blue.

“With any luck, there will be someplace safe on this path. If not, we can decide to push forward or head home. It depends on what’s going on in that area.”

We sat silently for a long moment, both of us clearly thinking about the trip. While I lacked a lot of the necessary context, it was clear that Tessa was taking this seriously, meaning that it would be dangerous but possible.

“Have you ever had a problem with savagers coming this close before?” I asked, leaning back in the chair.

“Not while I’ve been living on my own,” She answered, chewing her lip. “I remember there being a problem before mom died, but... I don’t remember the specifics. I’m not expecting them to knock on the side of the APC at any moment, either. That was an

hour's walk away, and it's doubtful that all of them have carrions." She explained. "They are a pain to keep fed in large numbers."

"Really? A meat-eating horse is hard to keep fed?" I asked jokingly. "I never would have guessed."

We talked a bit longer about what we would do if the scouts or the group he came from got closer before eventually heading to bed.

We both got up early the following day and quickly packed up to leave. Tessa had agreed that if we got lucky and found a bunch of food on our first light scavenging day, we would skip the second. We left the ACP, walking in the opposite direction as we had the day before, stopping at the first neighborhood we came across.

It was slow going, but we found a few valuable things. The most significant find to me was a plastic-covered couch. Neither Tessa nor I could think of why a sofa would be covered in plastic, but I wouldn't look down on getting lucky. The cushions would make sleeping a whole lot easier from now on.

We cleared six houses on the first day before heading back a few hours after noon, unpacking, and settling back in. Any worry about being boring was completely washed away by the fact that I now had cushions to sleep on.

The second day was a repeat of the first, with the weather making it a bit harder. We got up early and headed out, only to find a thick layer of fog had settled over the dreary morning. We had to go extra slow, as the fog was thick enough that it was hard to see the ends of the streets we were walking. Eventually, it burned off, the sky clearing up to a relatively warm and sunny day.

Unfortunately, the time was already lost, and we only managed to clear four houses. Still, even with the shorter time, we managed to find some more canned and preserved food. It was also interesting to see a different housing style in this corner of the town. All the

houses were similar, a concept I was familiar with from home. The interiors, however, were structured the same as well, which is different from how printed housing worked back home, as far as I understood.

The second break day ended similarly to the first, though I was more excited about going to bed, seeing how much better I had slept the night before. Tessa ruined it a bit, laughing as she pointed out that I would only get to sleep on it for one more day before we left for a three-day trip where we would most likely be roughing it on the floor.

I got her back by dabbing a smear of protein shake on her nose.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We got up early and prepared for our day-long trip to the green crate, our first stop for this multi-day journey. We started with a big breakfast before packing our bags with food. Tessa was hopeful that we could do some passing scavenging while traveling, but it would be stupid to depend entirely on it. We packed enough food between the two of us that we would comfortably make it to the green crate, where we would decide to continue or pull back and try again later. We also over-hydrated, as water would be much more difficult to find and clean while we were gone.

I was carrying most of the food supplies because between the two strength treatments, I could hardly even feel the extra load. Tessa was bringing a few long-term essentials, including a water purification kit, which was just a fancy way of saying she was carrying a pot to boil water in and a folded sheet of metal to catch the steam. She also had a few other odds and ends that we might need, things we only sometimes carried for our scaving runs, as we were always within a certain radius of the APC.

As we were preparing, Tessa stopped and sat on her bed, giving me a long look. After a while, she let out a sigh and shook her head.

“Have you ever shot a gun before?” She asked, watching me closely.

“Yes, a few times. But I’m not sure how well it would translate to the guns here,” I admitted, getting a weird look before she shook her head.

Without another word, she slowly reached down and undid her belt, or at least the holster part that held her pistol and ammo. She reached out and passed them to me, giving me a severe look and maintaining it.

“Are you sure?” I asked after a moment. “With my strength enhancements, I’m probably better off hitting things.”

“I know, which makes it less likely that you will end up using them,” She explained, pointing to the bullets with a grim smirk. “My bow means I have a pretty serious ranged option, one I can use without worrying about it costing an arm and a leg. Keep it as a last resort.”

I nodded, accepted the ammo clip and the holstered pistol, and started clipping them to my belt, ensuring I could access them easily. We spent a minute reviewing how it worked, how to reload it, and how to fire it, after which I practiced for a bit.

It was still relatively early in the morning when we finally set off. Tessa was a bit nervous about leaving the APC for so long, but if we wanted the health serums, it needed to be done. She double-checked her bow was clipped securely under her arm and that four arrows were securely clipped to its side. She then checked that her extra arrows were stored properly along her pack before giving me a nod and leading the way.

It didn’t take long for us to make it to unfamiliar territory, or rather territory that was unfamiliar to me. We passed a few burnt-out shops and a garage that was overgrown with a thick vine-like bush that seemed to have started inside the building. We also passed by and through more than a few residential areas that Tessa explained were already cleared out.

“The blue house has a stash of jewelry hidden in the garage. It’s like four or five neighborhoods worth of it,” She said, nodding her head toward the house she was referring to. “I gathered it together when I first moved out here. Never brought it home because I realized it was all basically worthless, and I didn’t want it taking up space.”

“Huh... you know people back home might be interested in that,” I idly commented, thinking of my Earth. “As a novelty, at least.”

“Really? Why not just loot some of it for themselves?” Tessa asked, looking at me over her shoulder. “I’d think that would be easy for someone who isn’t being tested like you.”

“Well... I meant to commemorate the stuff I’m going to be bringing back,” I corrected, doing my best to seem honest.

Tessa scoffed and looked ahead, shaking her head.

“Really hard to trust you when you keep lying about what this is all about,” She said, still looking ahead. “But as long as I get to keep this stuff, I don’t really care.”

I frowned. I already felt guilty about lying to her, and now it was obvious that she had seen through it completely. I contemplated coming clean right then and there before deciding it wasn’t the time. We would have plenty of time during and after this trip.

The silence that followed her rebuttal was a little awkward at first, something that hadn’t happened since the first day we had spent in each other’s company. After a while, Tessa let out a long sigh.

“I can feel it’s easier to breathe,” She said. “Not sure why a healing serum would do that, but it’s the only thing that’s different.”

“I experienced something similar,” I admitted, thinking of the healing gel I had spent a night in before being sent off. “Feels like your lungs suddenly have more space?”

“Yeah, and like that space works better than it did before.”

“It’s supposed to let your body heal stuff it couldn’t naturally before, so maybe lung damage is part of that list?” I responded, Tessa sending me a look at my guesswork. “Hey, I’m not an expert in any of this stuff, remember? I just know it works.”

“Fine. I can’t complain too much, it’s definitely a good thing.”

We were quiet for a while after that, though the silence was more natural, the awkwardness fading for the most part. As we kept walking, I could tell when we passed into territory that Tessa had never been to before as she got noticeably more nervous.

By the time it was around noon, we had stopped twice. The first was for a water break, both of us enjoying the cool water from our chilling canteen. The second time we stopped because Tessa heard something nearby. We both took cover behind an old rusted car before a singular animal came into view.

It looked like a blend of a buck and a horse, with a mean look on its face as it scanned its surroundings. Its skin seemed smooth, and instead of a rack of antlers that a buck would have, it had two horns that grew out of its skull, attached much more firmly than a deer's antlers would have been. The horns looked more lethal as well, a foot in length with singular points that jutted forward after growing out of its head.

I looked around, expecting more of them, but Tessa nocked an arrow on her bow and stood. She smoothly pulled back the bowstring and let her arrow fly, catching the mutated deer just above and behind its front legs. It sank in several inches, dark brown blood immediately pouring out. The deer screamed and charged at us, Tessa having given away our location when she stood.

I stood and jumped onto the car quickly, the deer spotting me and trying its best to turn away and run, realizing it was outnumbered. Before I could think about doing anything, Tessa pulled another arrow from its clip, strung it, and fired, this arrow slamming into its neck. The deer dropped a second later, limply rolling over from its own momentum.

"Not bad," Tessa said with a smirk, getting out from behind the car and looking up at me as she walked past. "What were you doing?"

“I don’t know! You didn’t give me any sort of warning!” I explained, shaking my head before jumping down from the car. “I didn’t know what to do, so I was getting ready to help. Should we be worried about its friends?”

“No, bicornes hunt alone,” She responded, making her way closer, slowing down as she approached. “Hey, come make sure it’s dead, will you?”

I followed after her and used the ax to hack at its neck, just above where Tessa’s arrow had hit. The mutated animal twitched once before going still.

“Hunt? For meat?” I asked, looking down at the two-horned abomination.

“Yup, that most mutants are carnivores,” She explained. “Even savagers live off of meat for the most part. Getting mutated and corrupted does that.”

She leaned down and pulled the arrows from the corpse before using her knife to cut and score each of the horns. When she was done, she stood and nodded toward it.

“Snap them off, will you?” She asked. “The village crafters eat them up. They use them as knife handles and stuff.”

I nodded and bent down, grabbing both of the horns and trying to figure out how to get the most leverage. I finally set myself up to pull them away from each other. I strained for a moment, cursing when they didn’t budge. I set myself up again and put my whole body into it, pulling the horns as hard as possible.

A crack echoed across the road as the smaller horn snapped around Tessa’s score line, though it was far from a clean break. I pulled it off and handed it to Tessa, who looked impressed.

“What?” I asked, already looking for a different angle to pull off the larger horn.

I put the mutant's head on the ground, stepped on it, and lifted the horn, yanking it a few times before it broke off, breaking even less clean than the first one.

"Nothing. I guess I underestimated those enhancements," She admitted with a shrug, already securing the horns in her bag. "They usually have to take the skull with them or cut them off completely with a saw. Never seen anyone just snap it off."

"Probably because it's such a bad way to do it," I pointed out.

"Huh... that is possible..." She admitted. "I'm not exactly a trained hunter."

I double-checked myself for blood, ensuring I didn't have any on me before we set out again. After our encounter with the lone bicorn, we pushed ourselves to put some distance between us, not wanting to be around the corpse when scavenger animals came to investigate the smell of food.

An hour or so later, the sun was high as we made our way up a rather tall hill, Tessa caught a look at the map as I was scrolling around it. She looked closer for a moment before looking out to the left, squinting for a minute before looking around.

"My old village is just out that way," She said, pointing in the direction she had been looking.

I followed her finger before looking down at the map, adjusting it for a moment before locking on to it. Even with the lack of detail one would expect with a basic, non-interactive map, I could tell a bit about the post-apocalyptic town. It was stretched over a few neighborhoods, with two large buildings built into the wall surrounding most of it.

"We are on top of a hill already... If we find something tall, we might be able to see it pretty well...." She said, trailing off, clearly not

sure if she wanted to.

We kept our eyes open, and after a few minutes, Tessa reluctantly pointed out a church that stood in a clearing. It was a basic stone brick and stone design, but there was a decently sized bell tower on one end.

It took us about thirty minutes to make our way through the church, which was in pretty good shape, most likely due to its solid stonework. I had a feeling it had been old even before the Collapse.

After I broke down the door keeping us out, we climbed the tower, stopping when we reached the part open to the air, a tarnished bell hanging from the roof of the structure. I resisted the urge to hit it or try and see if there was a way to activate it. Instead, I watched as Tessa walked to one opening and leaned on the stonework, peering out.

It was surprising how much we could see. My only guess was that the hill we had just climbed had been misleadingly tall, as we were now looking out at the overgrown, semi-destroyed suburb. After a minute of looking, Tessa handed me her binocular glasses and turned to leave, avoiding my eyes as she left.

“That’s Bakersfield. Don’t waste too much time. We have more distance to cover,” She said, already walking down the stairs.

I frowned and put the glasses on, looking out over the view and activating them. It took a minute for me to get used to them, but once I did, I quickly found the town. I recognized the two larger buildings from my map and could now see the wall that encircled most of the town was made up of stacked cars and reinforced by large wooden poles.

It took me a minute to realize the poles were repurposed telephone poles, which I only understood because Tessa had explained them to me. Inside the wall were smaller buildings. Some of them maintained pre-Collapse homes, and others were built more

recently. The more recent structures had a much more log cabin feel, clearly rustic and hand-made with basic tools. I could see people walking in and around the town about their business. I also noticed that there were fields all around the walls, with maybe seventy people working them.

Seeing so many people after only being around Tessa for so long was shocking, but I still wasn't interested in saying hello. This wasn't a socializing trip, both the trip we were on now and my trip to this broken Earth. Tessa was plenty enough help for me by herself. I deactivated the glasses and headed down the stone steps, finding Tessa sitting on one of the pews. I handed her the glasses, and she took them, hooking them on her jacket before standing.

"What did you think?" She asked as she dusted herself off. "Anything special compared to the high-tech wonderland you are from?"

"Eh... it's not bad," I admitted with a shrug. "Not as cozy as the APC, though. What the hell kind of name is Bakersfield anyway?"

She snorted and shook her head, turning back to the doorway we had entered from. She took a few steps and stopped, looking back at me.

"I wouldn't blame you, you know," She said, pausing for a moment before continuing. "If you wanted to go get them to help. They have more people and more resources. If you hand out a couple of green crates, they will probably help you."

"Yeah, I'm not trusting a town that victim blames not to throw me in a cell and use me to unlock the crates they bring back," I said, shaking my head. "Besides, we are doing pretty well. We will be zipping around the area pretty soon, grabbing purples like they aren't a big deal."

"Ha! Still not going anywhere near anything like a visper nest!" She said with a laugh before nodding to the door. "You ready to go?"

“Yeah, let’s get to it.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tessa set a quick pace as we left the church, almost as if she was running away from the spot we could see her old home from. We traveled through the old broken-down and ruined town, leaving the church behind. We passed by a few run-down residential neighborhoods, some buildings that were so far gone neither of us could identify them, and a parking lot that Tessa was pretty sure was an old car dealership. I wanted to go in and investigate, as it would probably have plenty of stuff worth scavenging, but Tessa pointed out it was already one pm, and we were on a schedule.

We eventually got closer to our first target for the trip, the green crate. I was confident we could handle it, but that didn't mean I wasn't also nervous about what crazy dangerous challenge would be waiting for us. We consulted the map frequently, not because we were worried about going off course, but because we didn't want to stumble onto the challenge by accident.

When we were close enough, we climbed onto the roof of a nearby building, some sort of shop that had long since been scavenged clean, with everything left rotted away. Once we had found a better angle, we looked out over the area where the crate was.

It seemed to have once been some sort of park, the outline of it cut and marked by thick, partially intact concrete pathing that occasionally branched off into the overgrown area itself. The space that wasn't marked by the paths was choked entirely with trees and underbrush, to the point that it was incredibly hard to see the forest's interior, despite the better angle. The forest itself was made up of a mutated tree that looked like some sort of pine but with dark red needles that were around a foot long hanging from its branches. The interior was so obscured that the only way to see what awaited us was to hike through the overgrown forest and find out for ourselves.

“Any ideas?” Tessa asked as we traded her binocular glasses back and forth. “I think I can just make out a clearing around the area where the green cache is supposed to be, but other than that....”

I looked in the same direction she had been and quickly spotted what she was talking about. It looked like a decent-sized clearing, but the trees completely hid what was in that clearing.

We kept a lookout for a half hour, waiting for any sign of a threat to show up before we finally made up our minds to head in. We climbed down off of the shop’s roof and made our way across a few streets to the overgrown park-turned-forest. We had to walk around a bit to find a path that my map said led to the clearing, but just the fact that the clearing seemed to show up on the map at all was reassuring.

As we made our way into the “park,” I was shocked at just how quickly it got darker. We had walked through wooded areas before, but the mutation in these trees had made the canopy even denser than this Earth’s frequently heavily overgrown areas. Vines hung between trees and the plant life, combining with the tree canopy to block out a significant amount of sunlight.

Following my map, it only took a few minutes to get to the center of the forest, which also just happened to be where the green cache was. Together Tessa and I stepped out into the clearing, finding a surprisingly intact man-made pond. It was choked by the trees and underbrush of the dense forest, with more than a few leaning over the murky water.

The pond itself was a pretty decent size. It was a curved oval, a bean-like shape that was maybe fifty feet across and seventy feet wide. It was lined by a stone barrier, most of which was covered by the overgrowth that had taken over the park. The water, while nowhere near as horrible as the pool I had almost stepped into not too long ago, was a murky brownish green, with the visibility dropping no more than a foot or so down.

The most impressive feature of the pond, however, was the bridge that crossed over it. A small island gazebo stood in the center, looking relatively intact. Two stone bridges, one mostly collapsed and the other mostly intact, connected on either side of the small island. The mostly undamaged bridge looked stable, even though the railings had long since fallen off into the water. The bridges would have connected each side of the pond together through the gazebo if one side hadn't crumbled into the water.

A quick visual scan around the area and I spotted the green crate sitting in the shade on the island gazebo. I quickly pointed it out to Tessa, who took one look and shook her head.

“Of course, god forbid it was somewhere easy,” she said with a hum. “On the other hand... well, you know what? Let's not tempt fate.”

We kept following the broken, cracked concrete pathway to the stone bridge, stopping just before getting on. We spent more than a few minutes looking around, checking out the bridge and the supports under it. The structure was surprisingly intact, considering just how long it had been standing there. I nervously chewed my lip, looking around at the surrounding trees and into the water, trying to figure out just what was supposed to be our challenge.

“And you're sure they didn't just miss one?” Tessa asked, repeating a question she had asked before.

“Positive. There has to be something here,” I assured her. “My guess is the water.”

“I don't disagree, but we should keep our eyes on the shoreline too,” She responded before taking a moment to steady herself and taking the first step onto the bridge.

We waited for a moment, anxiously waiting for something, anything, to happen. When nothing did, she let out a long breath and

took another step. I followed behind her, trying my best to step on the same spots she had.

The bridge was in worse shape than it first appeared, but it still held us easily. As we crossed, I could see the remnants of the railing in the water, maybe rusted away or collapsed down under the surface of the pond. There were also a few chunks of the bridge itself that were missing, but they were easily avoidable. I was starting to feel confident that this would be easy until Tessa took another step over one of the missing chunks. Her foot landed on a spot of green and black that was growing on the stone, a patch of slippery moss. In an instant, she slipped on the organic growth, causing her to tumble and lose her footing.

With a shout, somewhere between a curse and a scream, she slid off of the bridge through the missing chunk, falling into the water. She was submerged for a moment before she came up screaming and cursing, her arms reaching up as she tried to grab something to pull herself up.

Running on pure instinct, I reached down and grabbed her arm, hauling her up and out of the water with one hand. We both looked at each other, equally shocked at what had just happened. She opened her mouth to say something, only to be interrupted by an angry burbling and bubbling sound. We looked down into the water to see it shifting and moving as if the water itself was squishing and growing, looking for whatever had just disturbed it.

When it found nothing, it only seemed to become even more agitated, bulging and rising up, a thick, moving slime rising out of the ordinary, murky water. The foul stench of rotting plant life spread as the pond water level shifted downward.

Soon the semi-liquid abomination had risen higher than the bridge itself, shifting and quivering constantly. It seemed to be building up mass, pulling its body together from across the pond. Waves were generating all around the water as the giant slime pulled itself together.

We both watched this, our eyes wide as the mass of squirming slime shifted back. I thought it was moving away for a moment before it rose higher and moved again, preparing to slam into the bridge. The sudden movement broke us from our shock, and we both ran across the rest of the bridge, jumping the last few feet to land on the gazebo island.

The mass of slime smashed into the stone bridge, and the sound of grinding stone and cracking rock echoed across the pond before the bridge began to give way, half of it splashing down into the water, the other remaining parts suspended by the monstrosity that had attacked us. It raged for another few minutes, still searching for the prey that had escaped it before it finally started to calm down. Slowly but surely, it sank back under the water until all that was left were the small waves generated by displaced water.

We took a long few minutes, staring out over the water as it continued to calm down. Both of us were worried that the slime monstrosity would return and swamp the island. When nothing happened after five minutes Tessa, who had landed half on top of me as we had both dived off the bridge, put her forehead on my chest.

“That might be the most disgusting and horrifying thing I have ever seen,” She admitted before looking up at me. “Nice reflexes there, tough guy. Another few seconds and... well, unless you planned on diving in, I would have been gone.”

“No problem, it was all instinctual,” I admitted. “Just glad I got you out.”

I slowly got up and walked around the small island, keeping my eyes open for anything dangerous while Tessa went through and wrung out most of her clothes and emptied her backpack of water.

“I just hope whatever your health serum is, it can handle whatever the fuck is in that water,” Tessa said when she was done,

looking around the island as well.

We were both ignoring the green crate sitting in the middle of the gazebo, instead focusing on a much larger problem. The once mostly intact bridge was now gone completely. All that was left was a single support beam two-thirds of the way across the water. We shared an anxious look before walking around to the other side.

Though the bridge was obviously still gone on that side, most of the supports were still intact. With a bit of luck... it would be possible to jump from one to the other across the gap.

“Do you think you could make it?” I asked, gesturing to the damp stone.

“Maybe? If nothing fucks me up when I try,” She responded. “And that’s a pretty big if.”

I nodded before making my way under the gazebo’s shade, kneeling by the crate. It was the second largest green crate I had found so far, only beaten by the first one I had found in the parking structure on my first day. I waved my arm by the handle and the crate unsealed, the seam around the crate separating and letting me open it completely.

Inside was a singular black metallic left-handed glove. It looked a bit small sitting in such a large case, but as I pulled it out, it was clear it would fit either of us. Unfortunately, as I ran it along my arm to check the info, we learned that only I could wear it as it required the injected implants.

The glove was a stun glove, capable of producing a blasting concussive pop or a flash of blinding light three times a day. Simply point away from myself and my allies and activate with a thought. I pulled it over my hand and examined it more carefully, smiling as it resized to fit me perfectly.

The glove was a shiny, deep metallic blue and was made up of flat segments that moved and shifted as I opened and closed my hand. On the palm was a slight circular indentation, colored a solid black.

“You gonna test it out?” Tessa asked, trying to stave off the anxiety of our situation.

I nodded silently as I made a fist and flexed my fingers, checking out if the glove got in the way of any flexibility or strength, finally accepting that I didn't. After that, I gripped my ax, stepping away from Tessa to give it a few test swings. Somehow I was getting the feeling that my grip with the metallic glove was somehow *better* rather than worse.

Finally, I raised my hand up and thought about activating the flash. It didn't seem like much from my perspective, but judging from the glare I got back from the water and trees surrounding us, it had unleashed a massive flash of light in a pretty solid arc in front of me.

“Wow... That will give us an advantage, assuming what we are fighting can see or hear,” Tessa pointed out. “Which in our current situation might mean it's kind of useless for now.”

“Yeah... I'm not going to try the concussive one just yet, it seems like a good way to attract too much attention.”

“Good point... So... how are we getting off the island?” Tessa asked, looking around again. “Any ideas?”

We debated for a while, brainstorming a few possible ideas before settling on a plan. It was far from foolproof, but it was better than starving to death, waiting for something to happen. I picked up the green crate and stood at just about the center of the island, while Tessa stood right by the remnants of the second bridge, opposite the one that the slime abomination had just destroyed.

“Ready?” I asked, looking over at Tessa and waiting for her to steady her breath and nod.

I spun and threw the green crate as far as I could, hurling it into the water, the box splashing by the recently destroyed bridge. In seconds the slime swarmed around it, sucking the crate down, the semi-liquid horror gripping and slurping it down into the depths. As it did, it pulled the water from around the pond again, surging up just as high as it had before. It had clearly been waiting for us.

Hoping that the mutated monstrosity was sufficiently distracted, Tessa and I started jumping from pillar to pillar, with Tessa in the lead as she had started the second I started throwing the cache. Tessa managed to make it the whole way across without touching the water, while I slipped on the second to last support. Luckily the water was shallow where I landed, meaning I had just enough time to scramble up and out.

I could feel corded, slithering slime gripping at my leg when I managed to jump out of the water, crawling further from the shoreline, not stopping until I had about ten feet of clearance. Both Tessa and I turned to focus on the shore, waiting to see if we would have to run any further.

The water was roiling all around the island now, searching for whatever had disturbed it on our side and sucking down its captured “prey” on the other. Slowly, it started to settle, the water once again smoothing out until subtle waves across the surface was the only sign that anything had happened at all.

After a few minutes, Tessa let out a long-held breath and a shrug, turning around to lend me a hand in getting up.

“That could have gone worse,” She said, turning back to the lake before shaking her head and turning back to me. “Why don’t we find somewhere that doesn’t smell like rot to have some lunch?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

We didn't hang around very long after we made it off the small island, even if we wanted to take a break as soon as we possibly could. We slowly made our way out of the overgrown park and into the surrounding area, keeping an eye open for a place to eat. Eventually, we settled on a building that appeared to have been a restaurant before the Collapse, which meant there was plenty of space to sit down. We sat in the back of the building, hidden from any prying eyes that might happen by.

I poured us some cool water from our cooling canteen, refilling it with water from my own while Tessa opened up some cans. We ended up having canned chicken and canned peas and corn

"This would be infinitely more tolerable if we could mix them together and heat them up," I pointed out after swallowing a spoonful of peas. "Hell, it might even be marginally enjoyable with the right additions."

"I have a pot for boiling water, but we don't really have time to heat everything up," Tessa countered, though she clearly agreed. "We are already behind. We will have to rely on scaving and getting lucky to even...."

"What?" I asked as she looked up, clearly in thought and frowning. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just thinking that we might have underestimated how long this trip would take," She responded, shaking her head. "We need to hunt for water, purify it, and find some food as well. And that's all dependent on finding a place to sleep for the night. We have a lot of ground to cover before we get to the blue cache. While I don't want to sleep out here any more than I absolutely have to, I also don't want to rush."

I opened up the map and held my arm so we could both see it, zooming out so we could see our goal.

“How much longer do you think it will take to get there?” I asked. “It doesn’t look like much more than a day.”

“... You’re not wrong. Normally we would be able to reach it if we worked a bit harder. It’s this gap here that I’m worried about,” She admitted, tracing a stretch of unsettled land that we would have to cross. “This is a two-hour trek, minimum. *We cannot stop* once we start this, it has to be completed all at once. Pausing in that big of a forest is a good way to get hunted by something we can’t handle.”

I realized what she was getting at immediately. If we tried to cross it now, then we would have to really push ourselves to finish before it started getting dark, not to mention we would be relying on luck to find somewhere safe to hunker down for the night.

“Okay, why don’t we stick to this side of that gap for today, then? We can find a secure place to sleep and do some light scaving for the rest of the day,” I suggested. “Then tomorrow, we cross the gap first thing in the morning. If it takes too long, we can call the day a wash and scav in that area instead of making a beeline for the cache. Who knows, we may stumble into some more caches on the way.”

“That’s as sound a plan as any, I guess,” Tessa agreed after a moment of chewing her lip. “Alright then, let’s get going. We need to make a little more progress before we can start looking for shelter.”

We finished eating and headed out, tossing the trash further back into the restaurant and flipping over the table, so it wasn’t blatantly obvious that someone had been there. I called Tessa paranoid, but she just shrugged.

“It pays to be paranoid when everything wants to eat you, steal from you, or both,” She countered, and I couldn’t really disagree with her.

We kept making our way through the town, which was slowly becoming less and less populated with buildings, both commercial and residential. We kept an eye on our location with the map, making adjustments as necessary, all while making sure we didn't go too far. About two hours after lunch, we started really looking for a place to take shelter for the night.

We were fifteen or so minutes away from the long road that ran through the unsettled forest when Tessa spotted something, grabbing my arm to get my attention. She must have had her glasses activated because she ended up leading me five houses down a neighborhood before pointing out what she had seen.

It was a sturdy metal bulkhead set into concrete that seemed to be part of the house's foundation, painted red and locked tight. Before I could even ask, Tessa was already making her way around the building. A quick exploration of the house showed that there was an entrance into the basement from inside the house.

Together we cleared the house of anything useful, grabbing a few cans of food as well as a package of water bottles that Tessa seemed particularly excited about.

"It's gonna taste a bit like plastic, but purifying water with a fire and condenser is a massive pain in the ass, and it never makes enough," She explained as she examined the bottles, double-checking to make sure they were still sealed. "We would have gotten back to the APC pretty dehydrated, even if everything was going right."

Once we were done clearing the house of anything useful, we sealed up the basement's interior entrance. Luckily the style of the house meant there was a stairway down to the basement, meaning that we could stuff the entire thing with furniture, half-rotted books, and all sorts of other junk we could find around the first floor. The last thing I did was secure it by pushing and dragging the large fridge from the kitchen and tipping it over into the already-blocked

stairwell. The final result was a pretty secure basement under a typical, abandoned-looking home.

By the time we were done, it was almost four o'clock. It was getting late, but we wanted to be able to get up and leave the following day without having to worry about food, so we ended up going through the two of the neighboring houses. The first one was a bust, with the entire house emptied out. I was worried that we were in someone's scavenging area until Tessa pointed out the dust.

"No one has been here in years," She assured me as we finished going through the kitchen. "Plus, the fact that the cabinets are empty of even rotted stuff means it was probably cleared out when it was still edible. It could have even been done by the owners,"

The second home had more, though it wasn't much. A few cans of soup, two cans of canned meat, and a bottle of some sort of shelf-stable sauce that Tessa was happy to find but that I didn't recognize. She assured me it was good and that we would use some of it for dinner.

When we finally left the third house, Tessa cursed at how dark it had gotten, as we had lost track of time. We rushed back through the overgrown yard and locked ourselves back inside the basement, securing both the bulkhead doors and the inner door.

"Was running really necessary?" I asked as we unloaded what we had found.

I pulled out my lighting drone and activated it, setting it up to release just enough to let us see. The extra light made everything more straightforward, and at this low level, the drone would last for a long time.

"Screamers are just starting to wake up around now," She explained. "Trust me, we are far out of the quiet zone around the city."

The screamers wouldn't have killed us, but they would have gotten the attention of more dangerous things."

"How quiet should we be?" I asked softly. "Should I turn out the light?"

"Just don't yell," She explained with a shrug. "The house should be enough to muffle anything under that."

I nodded, looking around the basement. It was a finished basement, somewhat dusty but mostly dry, which was the most important thing for comfort. It appeared to be some sort of playroom, with a chest of small toys to one side, with plenty of others spread around it. There was a couch to the left of the room, which Tessa quickly checked out.

"It... seems to be in okay condition actually...." She said, flipping over the cushions, checking for mold, and finding none.

After another moment, she shrugged and sat down, letting out a sigh of comfort. I made my way and sat down on the other side. It had been too long since I sat on an actual comfortable couch.

"Stuff like this is the only reason I regret settling in the APC," Tessa admitted, leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

"Why not move?" I asked, watching her for a moment before following her lead. "I admit jamming furniture and stuff in the way to block that door is temporary... but it still seems pretty secure. With a little work, I bet you could think of a great way to make somewhere like this better than the APC."

Tessa was silent for a long moment, long enough that I thought she might have fallen asleep. I opened my eyes to check, finding her staring at the ceiling.

"Before I was kicked out of the village, I was a scavenger. Like my dad and his dad," She explained, still staring at the ceiling. "It's..."

not just about going out and digging through old houses. It's two parts looting, one part hunter, one part village protector."

As she talked, I started pouring our cold water into our canteens, cooling both of them considerably. She nodded in thanks and took a sip before continuing.

"We would do plenty of looting and scaving, but we would also monitor mutant spawning, clear out our territory, and catch or hunt untainted animals. It's an important job, and me and my dad? We were good at it. The best in the village," She said, a proud smirk on her lips. "The APC was our emergency meeting point, in case we ever got separated or whenever we decided to stay the night outside the walls. It was filled with stuff that we had gathered over time. Backup equipment, stuff we didn't have room for, and a few weeks of food. It was the perfect place to stay when I got the boot. I guess... there was never any reason to leave. Its armor keeps me safe and... I guess I just never felt like finding someplace with more room."

"... Why isn't your dad out here with you?" I asked, cringing at the question even as I asked it.

"He got pretty badly hurt about three months before it all happened. Got his arm and leg torn up by a raptor. He was lucky to keep them, even if they don't work nearly as well as they should anymore," She explained, rubbing her face and sitting forward on the couch. "He was barely recovered by the time I left. He... he would have been a liability, another mouth to feed, and a basically defenseless person to protect. We both knew that. It was hard, but if he had followed me out, we would have both ended up dead."

Tessa took a long sip from her canteen, nodding thankfully for the cold refreshing water. After a minute, she continued talking, now smiling slightly.

"He is doing better now, but he wouldn't be much used to scaving or hunting. So he stayed in the village. He helps where he

can, mostly teaching and some butchering, but mostly just banks on their gratitude for his service before he was injured.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“A month or so before winter,” She responded, her smile growing. “He hired John to help him make the journey, stayed for a few days while John went scavenging, and then went back with him when he was done.”

We were quiet for a while, comfortable silence filling the dusty basement. After a minute or so, Tessa wordlessly started opening the cans for dinner while I poured three of the water bottles we had found into the cooling canteen for later. When we were both sitting back on the couch, eating cold soup and canned meat, Tessa looked at me.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What about your family?”

My eyes went a little wide, and I focused on my food, nodding slowly, trying to figure out what I could say.

“Well... My family is the reason I am here,” I explained, taking another bite to buy me time before swallowing and continuing. “My dad died about three years ago in an accident with some... harmful materials. It killed him outright and left my youngest sister in a pretty bad way.”

I half expected Tessa to ask what kind of materials, so I was delighted when she stayed quiet. I took a deep breath and leaned back on the couch, chewing another bite of my food.

“Keeping her alive, the medicine and treatments, all while keeping the family afloat, was hard,” I explained, shaking my head.

“My mom and I worked more or less non-stop for the last three years. Sacrificed a lot. My older sister... disappeared not long after dad died. No idea where she went, but she sends help when she can.”

“Sounds rough.”

“I mean, it was, but life goes on, right?” I said, Tessa nodding in understanding. “Anyway, doing this whole thing raises us to... well, a higher status. It meant getting access to stuff that could actually fix my sister rather than just barely keeping her alive.”

“So they are waiting for you to come home?”

“Yeah, they are. But even if I don’t, I know it was worth it. For the opportunities they will have and that their kids will now have. I changed the path of our family, and that’s enough. Going home to enjoy it with them would just be a bonus.”

Again we were quiet for a while, both of us finishing up our food and tossing the trash into the corner. When we had resettled on the couch, Tessa broke the silence.

“I’ll make sure you get home,” She said with a smile. “You deserve to be back with your family.”

“Thanks,” I said with a small smile. “You know... by the time I have to go... you’re probably going to be stocked with a lot of useful stuff. You could probably ‘convince’ the town to let you back in. Barring that, you could probably leave. There won’t be much that will be able to hurt you by that point, so finding a town that doesn’t recognize you will be easy. You could start a new life there. It’s not the same, but... you wouldn’t be so alone.”

“Maybe... Maybe... First, we both have to survive to that point.”

“Double stacking the healing serums is going to be a big step in that direction,” I explained. “After this, we can be more confident in what we track down.”

Tessa nodded before stretching and yawning.

“Let’s get some sleep. The earlier we wake up tomorrow, the better.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It didn't take long for us to figure out that the best place to sleep would be on the couch, but there wasn't enough room for two people. Before I could volunteer to make the best of the few stuffed toys strewn around the room, covered in dust, Tessa pointed out that we should be sleeping in shifts anyway. With just the two of us, it would mean a lot less sleep, but it was necessary. I volunteered to stay up first, so Tessa laid down on the couch while I sat back near the basement exit, which also had a clear view of the blocked inner door.

It was more than a bit nerve-racking, and I could absolutely see why Tessa had latched onto the APC as a safe space and never considered moving. With no idea what kind of mutated abominations populated this area, I was hyper-aware of every muffled sound that made it down to us.

Thankfully, beyond the occasional distant screech from a screamer, my shift was boring enough that my biggest concern was falling asleep. I ended up having to stand up a few times to move around, doing my best to stay quiet and get my blood flowing. When the first five hours of the night were over, I woke Tessa up, letting her take over for the next five hours. I crashed pretty hard on the couch, dead to the world until she woke me up at about five in the morning.

We quickly packed up, leaving some of our extra loot tucked into the toy box, covered in toys, with the plan of following the same path on the way back. Once we were all packed and ready, we headed out. The morning was damp, with enough of a chill that we could see our breath as we crossed the last fifteen minutes of walking before starting our long trek through the forest-choked road.

The road, which on the map was more or less straight, was broken up by the roots of the trees on either side, with some new trees having even grown up through the road. The trees seemed off somehow, and Tessa confirmed that they were mutated, though she

couldn't say how badly as she wasn't familiar with the original. Still, it was enough to make us both nervous, so we put some extra energy into hurrying through.

When we finally emerged from the thick forest to the much more sparsely wooded and heavily settled area, it took our eyes a moment to adjust to the brightness. The thick, dense foliage had partially obscured the sun, meaning we hadn't noticed it had risen to a much brighter height.

We pressed on, keeping an eye on my map to keep from getting too close to the blue cache, even more nervous about tripping whatever trap or danger waited around the blue cache than we had been for the green reward the day before. As we started getting close, our anxiety and tension rose steadily, and we both did our best to move silently.

Eventually, Tessa stopped us, shaking her head as she examined the map projecting from my arm. After a moment, she pointed to a different area a few streets away, some sort of main road. She mimed looking through binoculars, tapping her glasses before nodding towards the spot she had pointed at. I nodded in agreement and followed behind her as we headed to that spot.

When we arrived, it was clear she had been correct. This position would give us a much better view down into the heart of the town, which was the direction that the blue crate was located. For an even better view, we cleared and climbed on top of a nearby building, a clothing shop that was surprisingly still in decent shape.

"I think the blue cache is in that building, the one with a tree embedded in it," Tessa said softly as we both leaned against the roof's edge. "Just before the road goes left."

She passed me her glasses, letting me see much further down the road. Sure enough, there was a building with a tree smashed through one side. It was two stories tall, made of brick, with two large garage doors side by side in the front. One of them was

still completely closed, while the other was partially open. The metal door was crumpled as if one side had refused to close, and the door had been forced shut anyway.

A quick check of my map confirmed that that was most likely where the blue cache was. I handed Tessa her glasses back, which she quickly put back on to keep an eye on the building. We spent about thirty minutes waiting and occasionally checking the location, looking for any clue as to what kind of danger was in store. Just as I was about to comment about maybe finding a different angle, Tessa grabbed my arm and squeezed.

“It’s a nest of tuskers,” She hissed, her eyes wide as she focused down the street. “Five of them that I can see.”

She passed me her glasses again, and I quickly focused on the same building as before. Sure enough, there were now a few plodding animals moving around the front of the building, sniffing at the ground and looking around.

The large creatures were covered in black bristly hide, with large humps on their backs. They looked like wild boars, but bigger and with disgusting sores and growths covering their bodies. As one of them turned its head to look around, I could see its jaws were massive, with a horrifying array of teeth, all splayed out and down, with two large tusks jutting forward.

“Holy hell... those are disgusting,” I said, returning her glasses. “What the fuck are we supposed to do about them?”

“Well... They are pretty tough, strong, and surprisingly fast in straight lines, and that many would gang up on the both of us if we just charged in... but with my bow and you as a distraction... between the both of us...” She explained, still watching the boar-like mutant. “We might be able to take a couple down. But it’s not going to be easy, and you’re the one who’s going to be gored on if I can’t take them all down before they catch up to you.”

“Don’t suppose we could sneak in after they leave?” I asked, suddenly a lot less interested in killing them. “Or wait to ambush them when they come close?”

“Do you know when they are going to come closer?” Tessa asked, looking at me after tapping her glasses. “Our best bet is to get closer and either get a better vantage point to pick them off or split the herd somehow to give us better odds.”

“Are they aggressive enough to follow the bait?” I asked. “Maybe I could scare them off with my glove? If they scatter....”

“Their mutants,” Tessa responded, with a look that said that was all the answer I needed. “They will chase anything. And if they scatter, then we risk getting pinned when we go into the den.”

We quietly debated for a while, Tessa keeping more or less a constant eye on the tuskers while we did. Eventually settled on a middle ground between both ideas. Tessa would focus on making her way to a roof that was slightly closer to the den than this one, leaving me alone on the ground below the building we were currently on. When she was in position, I would use the lighting drone, instructing it to fly over and strobe the tuskers with light.

With any luck, the drone would get some of their attention but not all of them. Then we would ambush them, with Tessa hitting them with arrows and me finishing them off. If they all followed the drone, then Tessa would pick them off, and I would find cover, letting her take them all out. The only reason we wouldn’t go with the second plan straight off was that Tessa was concerned that she wouldn’t be able to take them all out with the bow. She knew that tuskers could be taken down with a bow, unlike the skelly-wolves we had fought around the last blue cache, but she had no idea how easily they would go down.

It took a few minutes to get everything set up and for Tessa and me to get in position. I was hiding around a corner, a few buildings down from our original vantage point, while Tessa was

across the street, sitting on the roof even closer to the den. Once she gave me a wave, I activated the drone and tapped it away.

“Fly forward to one of those creatures, strobe your light twice, and fly back along this road until the end,” I said to the flying disk, which raised out of my hands and flew around the corner and out of sight.

I peeked around the corner, watching the drone as it flew down the street, getting closer and closer to the tuskers. I watched for another few seconds before pulling back and leaning against the corner, not wanting to get spotted, if they were even smart enough to recognize me as food this far away.

After a few seconds, I could hear the sound of angry and startled squealing echoing down the road. It was loud, louder than I expected from this far away. I turned slightly, just enough to see Tessa. She gave me a thumbs up and pulled out an arrow, already preparing to fire.

Silently I waited, my heart rate picking up as the sounds got closer and closer. I closed my eyes and waited, listening for my cue to attack, for Tessa to give the signal. I could hear the tuskers getting closer, could hear them squealing and chasing my drone... Any second now...

The twang and thump of Tessa releasing her first arrow reached my ears, and I turned around the corner, my axe in hand, ready to strike. I could see one of the three tuskers that had taken the bait and charged away from the den was already flopping on the ground, an arrow sticking out of their side, just below their neck.

One boar had already passed me, but the second boar was right in front of me, just about to run past me. With a loud huff, I swung my axe down and slammed it into its tough hide. I managed to slam the axe head almost directly into its hip, but its forward momentum nearly tore my weapon from my grip, the massive beast tumbling away, struggling to its feet immediately. I could hear Tessa

firing another arrow at the mutated boar behind me as I focused on the mutant in front of me. It was bleeding heavily and struggling to turn and attack, while the last boar, the one in the lead in chasing down the drone, finally noticed his backup was under attack.

The injured mutant charged me, squealing and grunting as it did. I let it build up speed before getting out of the way, just barely avoiding its massive size as it attempted to run me down. As it went by, I hit it again, slamming my axe into its stomach. Gore and blood poured from this new wound, its legs giving out, the enormous beast sliding and rolling past me. Wanting to take care of it completely, I ran after it, hefting my axe and slamming it down into its skull.

“Leon!”

Tessa’s shout and the twang of her bow pulled my attention back to the fight at large, and I had to dive to the side to avoid the third boar abomination, my axe still firmly embedded in the dead abomination’s skull. It slammed into the boar I had just killed, an arrow stuck in its haunch. I rolled and got to my feet, my back to a rusted-out truck, all while pulling out my combat knife.

The boar recovered quickly, despite the arrow Tessa had put in it. It charged me, and I raised my hand, activating the flash from just a dozen feet away. The street lit up for a split second, and the pig squealed in pain, charging me without being able to see where I was. I jumped out of the way and let it slam into the wreck behind me, the whole thing shaking, even sliding a few feet.

The impact seemed to daze the boar, giving me a chance to plunge my combat knife into its eye, all the way to the hilt. Immediately the mutant shook and went silent, collapsing with a long exhaling groan.

Immediately I looked around, looking up and down the street, my adrenaline pumping as I checked to make sure there weren’t any more four-legged abominations on the way. When the street appeared clear, I quickly pulled my knife free, cleaning it on the

mutant hide before retrieving my axe as well, giving it a wide swing to get most of the blood off.

I glanced up to find that Tessa had already left her perch and was quickly rushing out of the building to join me on the road. She quickly pulled her arrows out of the mutant corpses, cursing quietly when one of her arrows, the first one she shot, snapped and broke as she pulled it free. She drew another arrow from her pack and clipped it into place on her bow.

“Not bad,” She finally said, looking down the road. “There should only be two left. The last I saw, there was one on the outside and one inside the den. Ready?”

I nodded in agreement, and we headed down the road. With me in the lead on one side and Tessa slightly behind but on the opposite side. It didn't take long for the boar on the outside to notice us, immediately zeroing in on me and charging, its head lowered to gore me with its tusks. This one was even bigger than the other three, a massive mutant monstrosity.

“Focus on the other one if it comes out!” I told Tessa as it got closer.

Fighting my rising fear, I walked closer, passing by a telephone pole as I did. At the last second, I hopped out of the way of the charging boar mutant, the abomination squealing in frustration as it missed me. I spun as it passed me, lashing out with a simple but powerful kick. Between my enhanced strength and the beast being taken by surprise, I managed to knock it off course slightly. The mutant stumbled away from me, just enough to slam face-first into the wooden telephone pole. I could hear the crack of the boar breaking its own face on the immovable wooden pole, even as I swung my axe down across its back, slamming it down three times.

At this point, its legs had given out, but it was still squealing and grunting loudly. I stepped forward and finished it off with a hard thwack to the skull, caving it in with my axe.

I heard the sound of Tessa firing her bow, and I turned to find her already stringing a second arrow, firing and taking down another mutated boar. I looked around, listening carefully and checking up and down the street, Tessa doing the same.

“It’s a lot easier to be confident about this when I know I’m not going to keel over dead from some random scratch getting infected,” Tessa admitted when we were both satisfied that nothing was sneaking up on us.

“I know what you mean,” I said, chuckling in agreement before gesturing to the den building. “Let’s go make it even easier then.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Even though we were both running high on adrenaline, we hung around outside the den building for a while. Tessa was worried that there might be more tuskers around and that they might return while we were inside, forcing us to fight them in a much more claustrophobic situation. Fighting them outside had been nerve-racking enough, like walking on a razor's edge when the razor was actively trying to bite you.

Between the fear of getting caught inside, as well as my own worry about making stupid decisions while wired from the fight, we waited for twenty minutes before finally closing the last bit of distance, stopping by the crumpled metal garage door.

I pounded on the garage door, worried there might be tuskers waiting for us. When nothing responded to the loud banging and rattling, we looked for a more standard entrance or even a window for us to get in through. The broken garage door would have required that we climb in on our hands and knees, and neither of us wanted to be in that position.

Luckily, while the front door was blocked by the fallen tree, there was a back entrance that was unlocked. I pried it open with my axe and deployed the lighting drone, the small disk following me in, with Tessa right behind me.

The smell hit us both at the same time. The ungodly stench of solid and liquid waste, rotted meat, and whatever else the mutants were doing inside their "den." Both Tessa and I gagged, our eyes watering as we both scrambled out of the building, the drone following behind me. We were both retching so hard that we had to lean against the rough brickwork of the building once we were outside.

"That... that was horrific! Worse than the screamers!" I finally managed to get out, groaning and wiping my eyes. "I don't... I don't

even have the words!”

“That... might be the worst thing I have ever smelled,” Tessa admitted, steadying her breath. “But we need to get through it.”

“Of course we do, but holy fucking hell....”

We spent a few minutes collecting ourselves before trying again. Between knowing it was coming and doing our best to prepare and push through it, we managed to make our way through the building. It was some sort of office space, with TVs on the walls and computers on every desk. As we entered into some kind of connected break area, a sign on the wall finally queued us into what type of building we were in.

“Fire Station 12...” Tessa read, her voice sounding nasally as she focused on not breathing through her nose. “Should see if they have a spare axe for you.”

“Don’t try to make me laugh. I’ll probably throw up instead.”

We made our way to the room that the large garage doors connected to through a large open doorway. The smell was even worse in there, our eyes watering, almost burning from the acrid smell of ammonia. A small fire truck of some kind, painted red and marked with a truck number, was parked in one bay, leaving the other empty. Almost every inch of the open space was covered in foul waste, as well as shockingly high along most of the walls.

Seeing that there was nothing for us to find in this room that wasn’t covered in a horrific combination of tusker waste or rotted meat, we quickly looked around and found the steps to the second floor, which was where my map told me the cache was. We headed up immediately, desperate to get away from the smell.

The smell was moderately better by the time we stepped into a barracks of sorts on the second floor. It had rooms on either side of a large hallway. The hallway led into a larger living space with

couches, a TV, and a small kitchen and dining room area. It was covered in dust and still smelled strongly of the disaster that was downstairs, but that didn't matter. What did matter was the blue box that was sitting on the table.

"That's it?" Tessa asked, watching as I walked over to it.

"No, it's a differently weirdly clean box that also just happens to be sealed to anyone but me," I responded, waving my arm along the box.

I cracked the box open, which was the same size as the one Tessa had gotten from the Skelly-wolf den. Inside were two serums, identically to the ones both Tessa and I had. I took one out and handed it to the brown-haired survivor, taking my own and running it along my arm to read its description.

"So this one should be even easier than the first. But the effects are even more pronounced, meaning we will heal even quicker. It will be even harder for us to bleed out, and we will be immune to-" I stopped reading the outline to focus for a moment, re-reading the last time before chuckling. "Well... that makes finding food and water easier. No more worrying about clean water, as long as we aren't drinking mud and it's not radioactive. Also... we can eat mutated meat and not get corrupted."

"That, that's a big step up..." Tessa pointed out, rolling the autoinjector around in her hand. "I would have thought the metabolism serum you mentioned would do that."

"It's possible they both do," I admitted with a shrug. "But we can't survive on just mutant meat. The other stuff we get from cans, and the fresh stuff we get from John is important too."

"Still... not sure I want to eat mutants... I mean, unmutated meat is pretty rare, at least from anything bigger than a squirrel, but I'm still not eager to try it."

“Wait... does that mean the jerky we got from John was squirrel jerky?” I asked, giving her an unhappy look.

“What, you think the towns got a couple dozen cows hidden somewhere?” She asked, smirking and shaking her head. “It was good, wasn’t it?”

I scoffed and shook my head, unable to deny her words. Instead, I looked around, sat down with my back against the half-collapsed couch, and injected the serum, the autoinjector jabbing straight through my pants easily.

The immediate heat and pain dissipated much faster than the similar first injection had, all the way back before I was sent to Alt Earth. I could still feel the warmth spread, seeping into every part of my body before settling into place and slowly fading. When the sensation was over, I let out a long breath before standing, shaking myself off, and brushing the dust off.

Tessa, who up to this point had just been watching me, quickly injected herself as well, shaking her head through the slight pain and warmth before standing as well.

“Kinda feels like taking a big shot of moonshine or some fancy scaved booze,” She commented with a shrug. “Warm and tingly all over.”

“Yeah, you’re not far off,” I agreed, looking around the room. “What’s next? Do you want to try to make it back to that basement before it gets too late?”

“Not unless you feel like running,” She said, shaking her head. “This took way too long. It’s already a few hours past noon. No, I think we should try and find somewhere to stay tonight, maybe do some light scaving in the meantime.”

“Are... we gonna try it?”

“Try what?” She asked innocently.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t play dumb. Are we going to try mutant meat?” I asked with a pointed look. “We went through all the trouble of killing it. Seems like a shame to just let it rot now that we could actually eat it safely....”

“Fine, fine, yeah, wasting it would be stupid,” She agreed, throwing her hands up in defeat. “But listen, we absolutely cannot let anyone know that we are eating mutant meat. They will not believe us when we tell them we are immune, and barring some really shitty life-or-death situations, will get you labeled as a dangerous psychopath. You saw what it did to that guy.”

With her agreement, we headed back out of the fire station. Before we did, I had the brilliant idea to go through the cabinets of the kitchen, grabbing salt and a big thick iron pan to cook the meat in.

We quickly discovered that the smell hadn’t gotten any better. To avoid it altogether, we both ended up holding our breaths until we were out, practically running for the last dozen feet or so.

“And you want to eat the things that made that smell?” Tessa asked, giving me a skeptical look before starting to make her way back around the building.

“It’s something we should get used to,” I answered with a shrug. “It’s basically free food whenever we go cache hunting. With most of the serums requiring at least some sort of food increase, can we really afford not to?”

We walked away from the building, eventually stopping by one of the massive boars, specifically the one that I shoved into the path of the pole. A large pool of blood had spread out around it, all but pouring out of the three massive injuries along its back.

“So... You wouldn't happen to have any idea how to do this... would you?” I asked, looking at the hulking corpse.

Instead of answering, Tessa just shook her head and got to work, pulling out her own combat knife. It took her about ten minutes to pull out a large portion of meat from its back. She dropped it into the pan I had grabbed before wiping her knife on the boar's back.

“There. Now come on, I want some distance between us and this mess in case some scavengers come by and go wild.”

We left the area quickly, heading back up the main road before taking a right and crossing several streets while looking for a place to stay for the night. Eventually, we settled on a two-story motel. It was a basic structure, with ten rooms on the bottom floor and two outside stairs leading up to a walkway, where there were ten more rooms. Tessa caught on to my skepticism that the primarily wooden structure would be safe, but she quickly waved my worries away.

“Don't worry. It might not look secure, but with a little work, it will be. Let's just have some lunch, and I'll show you.”

We quickly checked out the motel's first floor, making sure that there wasn't anything dangerous waiting for us. When our search came up clean we headed to the second floor, kicking down a door into one of the rooms. It was basic, dusty, and rotted in a few places but serviceable.

With our temporary sanctuary set, lunch was our next concern. We started a small fire on the ground, away from where we would be staying the night, breaking up random bits of furniture and a few chunks from the welcome sign for fuel. I put the pan on the fire and waited for it to heat up.

“You don't care at all, do you?” Tessa asked as we sat around the fire. “You have hesitation whatsoever.”

“About eating this? Not really, no,” I answered, looking over at her. “I’m a bit surprised you are having such a hard time with it.”

“Leon, everyone knows not to eat mutant meat! It’s like... it’s like a fundamental rule of survival!” She responded, shaking her head. “My parents hammered it into my skull from the second I could talk. It’s like... it’s like two or three steps above cannibalism in terms of taboo-ness!”

“... If it freaks you out that much, we don’t have to. We can leave it as a last resort, something we only do if we absolutely have to,” I pointed out.

“No, no, it’s okay... The fact that we can do it safely means we should,” She admitted, if a bit reluctantly. “But you’re so nonchalant about it.”

“It just wasn’t something I was taught. I mean, you’ve seen me. There is a lot about surviving that I had no idea about. Are you surprised they didn’t explain how important not eating the mutants would be?”

I carefully salted both sides of the tusker steak before laying it out into the pan, the meat sizzling and popping as the fat rendered from the heat. I wrapped some cloth around the iron skillet handle to push it somewhere with less intense heat. Just because I was sure we would be fine health-wise didn’t mean I wasn’t going to make sure it was cooked thoroughly, all the way through. This meant keeping the pan at a relatively low heat so it would have more time to raise the internal temperature.

“At least you seem to know what you’re doing,” She commented.

While we waited for the meat to cook, Tessa took care of the cooling canteen, splitting its contents between the two of us. By the time I was done cooking both our mouths were watering. We devoured the meat, cutting chunks off of them and eating it out of the

pan. Tessa hesitated, but after I had chewed and swallowed the first chunk, she relented.

“Damn... That’s good,” She said, looking annoyed with herself as she quickly got another bite. “It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten something hot and fresh like this. And it beats the hell out of squirrel meat....”

It didn’t take long for us to finish our well-earned lunch. I turned the pan over onto the fire, both to put it out and to let the heat burn off the smell of cooked meat. With any luck, by the time we went to bed tonight, the breeze would have carried the remnants away.

Full and ready to keep busy, we quickly scavenged through the surrounding buildings. It was a cursory look more than anything, our eyes open for anything obvious and useful, but since time was limited we couldn’t afford to look too deep. We managed to find some cans of soda and a few bags of chips from a vending machine. It had already been smashed and cleared out, but some of the stuff had fallen down and away from the machine.

By the time the sun was starting to set, we were back at the motel, and Tessa was ready to let me in on the secret of how the motel was actually safe. She walked to the further set of stairs and pointed to a wooden pole.

“Smash this for me, would you?” She asked with a smirk.

Doing as she said, I smashed out the support beam and three others before pulling the wooden stars apart. In total, it took fifteen minutes with my axe and enhanced strength. We moved to the second when we were done with the first set of stairs. This time I took down the major supports and carefully climbed up the stairs, leaving Tessa to do the final demolition. It took her a bit longer to do it on her own, but when she was done, she tossed up my axe, I leaned down, and she jumped up to grab my hand.

It was a bit more challenging than it had been at the slime pond, mainly because that had been a hundred percent instinctual, but I managed to lift her up to the now wholly isolated second floor.

“And there you have it!” Tessa said, wiping the sweat off of her face. “Not as good as the basement, but not bad, right?”

“Yeah, not bad.”

We spent a minute looking out into the town from the balcony walkway, recovering from the day. We headed into the room when the screamers started to show up, leaving random buildings around the town to fly and occasionally screech in the sky.

We enjoyed a quiet cold meal of chips, flat soda, and soup before Tessa pulled the dusty sheets of one of the beds and climbed in to get some sleep. About fifteen minutes later, I was sitting on the half-broken-down couch, scanning around with my projected map, when I spotted something interesting.

I wasn't sure at first, but after a long moment of watching, it became clear. A purple cache, one that was actually in the same direction we had been traveling in, was moving.

Chapter Thirty

I kept watching the small purple dot as it slowly but surely moved across the map. After confirming that yes, it was definitely moving, I zoomed out on the map, trying to figure out where it had been located. I wasn't entirely sure, but it seemed to have traveled quite a way, assuming I remembered its original position correctly.

Unfortunately, all I was really certain of was that it wasn't the visper nest. That was the closest purple cache to the APC, so I knew exactly where that was, and it hadn't moved. I rechecked the map, and sure enough, it was still moving, crossing a street at a walking pace. I racked my brain, trying to recall if I had checked the map when Tessa had gone to retrieve the Skelly-wolf cache and if I had noticed it moving.

After a few minutes of watching it move, I decided to wake up Tessa. She was annoyed but quickly picked up on my high energy. I sat down on the bed next to her and showed her the map, which was already focused on the purple dot. After a moment, her eyes widened.

"Did that just move?" She asked, leaning up to get a better look.

"Yup, I've been watching it for a while. I think it came from this area, and it's already moved all through here. It seems to be sticking to the roads too."

We watched it for another minute before she moved, sitting on the edge of the bed with me.

"What do you think is happening?"

"Well... something is moving it," I said with a smirk, getting the stink eye in response. "I don't know. If it's a small container then something stupid could have eaten it. Or someone might have found

it and thought it was interesting enough to take. There is no way they are going to get it open, but-

As I talked, Tessa blinked and looked down before taking my hand and using it to manipulate the map. It took her a minute to scroll around, studying a few different spots before poking me.

“Zoom it out around here.”

I did as she asked, zooming it out until the purple cache was just barely showing up in the lower left corner.

“This,” She said, circling an area with her finger. “Is the savager camp I mentioned before. It kinda looks like it’s heading right for it.”

We sat silently on the bed and watched the dot move. It was hard to notice, but after a few minutes, the crate was clearly heading in the same direction.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said, shaking my head. “Considering what we have had to fight for the two blue caches, a purple... they couldn’t have just gotten lucky.”

“Unless it was a bigger group,” Tessa begrudgingly pointed out. “That camp has always been on the bigger side. A large group, maybe even a raiding party could have stumbled into whatever was around the crate. They could have won...and now they are limping back to the camp.”

“That’s... That’s good!” I said, standing and pacing around. “If they stumbled on it, they must have taken some serious casualties.”

“It’s possible... but there’s no way to know.”

“Then we need to find out!” I said, turning back to focus on my partner. “Think about it. Depending on what they fought, they could be in big trouble. If it’s comparable to a visper nest...”

“I... wouldn’t clear out a nest of them without a significant number advantage,” Tessa admitted, chewing her lip. “And just stumbling into something that deadly....”

“It’s our chance to get a purple cache without fighting something like vispers,” I explained, still having no idea what a visper actually looked like.

“They might have gotten lucky,” Tessa pointed out. “For all we know, had an emergency stock of bullets and took whatever was around the cache easily.”

“Or they took a lot of casualties and returned to the camp severely weakened, dragging the crate back as a souvenir,” I pointed out excitedly. “I’m not saying one is more likely than the other, but we need to find out. They might have done the hard part for us!”

Tessa nodded but stayed silent, chewing her lip as she thought. Eventually, after a minute had passed, she nodded.

“Alright. But the scouting comes first, and we play it safe,” She said, motioning me to come back on the bed, pointing at the map when I settled back in. “This should be a relatively high area. I have no idea what their camp looks like, just its general location. If we show up and it’s a fortress, I don’t care if there’s only one guy left with a vaguely pointy stick. We are going home. I’m not letting you get us killed for some high-tech crap.”

“Alright, yeah, sure,” I accepted with a nod. “I don’t feel particularly up for suicide missions either, but this is a chance we can’t pass up without investigating a little.”

“Good. Then I’m going to get some sleep, and we can leave tomorrow morning,” She said, laying back and sliding back onto the bed. “It’s going to be two days of travel to get there, so I hope you’re ready to rough it for a while longer.”

With that, she laid back on the bed and seemed to go to sleep, leaving me alone with my now excited thoughts. Getting our hands on a purple crate would likely make the process of getting blue caches much easier, meaning that soon we would be strong enough to take on other, unaided purple runs. This could catapult us forward in our progress.

I just hope the nobles were finding all of this entertaining.

I stood from the bed and sat down on the half-fallen-apart couch, sitting down carefully to continue my watch. After a few more hours, it was time to trade out and catch some sleep for myself. Part of me wasn't sure I would be able to sleep, but the trails of the day caught up to me, smashing my excitement down enough that I fell asleep nearly instantly, barely registering that Tessa had taken my place on the couch.

I woke up to Tessa shoving my shoulder, standing over me. She had an odd look in her eyes, my sleep-addled brain took a minute to decode as determined.

"I changed my mind," She said, sitting on the bed we hadn't cleared off.

"What?" I asked, rubbing my face until my brain booted up. "Wait, about the purple crate? Why."

"I'm not comfortable putting my life on the line like that," She explained with a shrug. "Not when you're still hiding things. I'm not stupid, Leon. Something is going on here."

"I...", I started to respond, trailing off when she bulldozed over me and kept going.

"I'm not exactly sure what it is yet, but I'm almost certain that a lot of what you've told me is bullshit. And to be honest, for the most part? I don't really care. The healing serums alone are worth being lied to by a large margin. You could have told me the sky was purple,

and I would have nodded along and agreed with you. But this... this is different. Going after this savager camp, there is a good chance if we fuck up, that's it, we're dead. I'm not willing to risk getting raped, killed, and eaten by a bunch of crazy corrupted bastards for a lie or even a partial truth. You want my help? Then you need to lay it all on the table."

I looked at her for a long moment, both of us silent. It was clear she had been building up steam for this for a while, maybe even all night. I looked around the room for a moment, noticing that the sun was rising outside, and the light was starting to shine into the room through the gaps in the window shades.

"Tessa, it's not like I was lying to you to lead you into something or trick you," I finally explained, looking back at her. "But can you blame me for holding stuff back? We barely know each other. Sure I trust you to a pretty good degree at this point but, but..."

"No... I get it," She admitted, running her fingers through her hair and letting out a long sigh. "I don't blame you for it. But I do mean what I said. If you don't want to explain, that's fine. We can go back to the APC, go back to playing pretend, and hunting down the easy caches. But if you want this purple..."

"Alright, alright. But fair warning, your not going to believe me."

I spent the next forty minutes explaining everything, from my version of Earth and the state of noble rule, to Ilbryen's offer, to arriving here. I filled in the gaps of what I had explained so far, fully explaining how desperate my mother and I had gotten and how terrible my sister's life had been. I explained what I knew about the class divide, about what my Earth had achieved in the last three hundred years or so.

As I talked, I got more and more frantic. She was silent for the most part, only asking a few questions, mostly just wanting

clarifications on what something meant, or why something had happened. When I finally stopped, I just looked down at my hands. I was surprised at how much I wanted her to believe me and how nervous I was that she would just leave. At this point, I could probably give a fair shake at survival by myself if she did.

But I still didn't want her to go.

After a long few moments, she stood from her spot on the opposite bed and sat down next to me, turned in my direction. For a long moment, she was silent, staring into my eyes before finally speaking.

"Swear to me that you are telling the truth. Swear to me on your father's grave, on your sister's health, that the insane story you just told me is true."

"I do. I swear that it's true," I answered immediately.

She nodded and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath and letting it out., She stood and dusted herself off, offering me her hand.

"Well, let's get going then," She said, pulling me off the bed. "We have a savager camp to spy on."

I nodded and smiled, squeezing her hand before she turned and grabbed her bag, cracking open the door and stepping out. After grabbing my own bag, I followed her, and we headed out into the town, jumping off the second-story platform where the stairs had once been.

As we crossed the town, carefully avoiding the fire station and, more specifically, the corpses that would be a beacon for scavengers, Tessa finally started asking questions about my story.

"So, they are watching us right now?" She asked, looking up and around, searching for the invisible drones I occasionally forgot existed.

“Probably. I know it’s invasive, but...”

“Even when we are in the APC?” She asked. “Because I can’t imagine them sneaking by us through the hatch.”

“ I wouldn’t be surprised if they have a permanent camera in the APC to get around that,” I guessed with a shrug. “I’m sorry, but to get my family what they needed, a lack of privacy is a small price to pay.”

“I have a feeling I would be more upset about it if you weren’t sharing the spoils so well,” She said. “Especially since they included me when you asked for the healing serum locations.”

“Well, don’t feel too grateful,” I responded. “They are nobles. They are only looking out for themselves.”

“And it’s okay that you’re saying that?” She asked, looking over her shoulder at me as we crossed another empty street.

“Yeah, it’s not like... well, it’s not like they police information. It’s all out in the open,” I explained. “There’s nothing anyone can do about it, so why try and hide it?”

“Really? Nothing?” She asked. “I mean, I don’t want to bad mouth the people getting you home....”

“They wouldn’t strand me here,” I assured her. “The contract I signed said that as long as I held up the end of my bargain, they would get me home. Even if the box I came in broke, they would have to make another and send it here to pick me up. Nobles don’t break contracts.”

“I guess I’ll take your word for it,” She responded before continuing her previous point. “I find it hard to believe that lowies haven’t just risen up.”

“Tessa, think of the stuff we have found so far. The strength serum, the healing serum, all the equipment?” I instructed, waiting for her to nod before continuing. “All that stuff is trash compared to what they have access to. We might as well try and take down a pack of skelly-wolves with pillows and mean words.”

We were quiet after that as we left what appeared to have been a town center to cross the more residential spaces. I could tell Tessa didn't quite understand, but I chalked it up to her growing up in a different world. As we traveled, I frequently checked the map, heading for the purple cache, which had stopped sometime last night. It was right where Tessa had said that the savager camp was, which was good because if it hadn't stopped, we would never have been able to catch up to it.

“So, do you have any idea of what to expect?” I asked as we passed a home covered in some sort of mutated moss.

“Anything I knew about their numbers is likely out of date,” She pointed out. “I know they set up shop in an old office building, but beyond that, I have no idea.”

“Well... At least we know exactly where the crate is,” I pointed out. “No looking around for it while trying to stay hidden.”

“Hey, don't forget this is all still up in the air,” She pointed out. “We aren't doing this unless it's reasonable. I don't care what your contract says.”

“I know, I know,” I assured her. “You get the final call.”

She nodded, seemingly satisfied that I understood what was going on. We kept on moving, settling in for a lengthy walk.

Chapter Thirty-One

We continued to travel for some time before finally setting up for the night in a random basement. It was reasonably secure as there was no interior entrance, only a thick, sturdy door at the bottom of some concrete stairs, tucked behind a backyard deck. We settled down quickly after I pushed a large cabinet of tools and junk in front of the door. We ate a quick dinner, and I teased Tessa about missing real, cooked meat. After a bit of verbal poking, she reluctantly agreed that harvesting meat would be a higher priority next time we ran into a mutant.

We took turns sleeping, starting relatively like usual so we could head out as soon as the sun rose the next day. The mood was tense, as we both knew we were rushing towards something particularly risky. We traveled as fast as we safely could, stopping twice to go around an area after Tessa spotted some worrying tracks. We also did some light scaving for food and water, our supply of the bottles we had found before rapidly dwindling.

It was obvious that the constant travel was taking its toll on both of us. We were both clearly tired, as trading off watch at night meant that neither of us was getting enough sleep. We were rationing water, which was slowly but surely catching up to us. The only positive part was that our scaving was finding plenty of canned food. We both felt bad leaving all sorts of other useful goodies behind, but they would only be slowing us down.

We did keep some stuff. I managed to stumble on an almost entirely full box of small caliber bullets. Tessa was over the moon with the find, the fact that they didn't match her own pistol barely even phased her. She promised that when we got back, she would leave a note for John, as the village kept a stockpile of weapons just in case someone found a bunch of usable ammo. Guns themselves were next to worthless, with how little ammo was still floating around, so trading for one would be relatively cheap.

We also stumbled on a green crate as we passed a gated-off area, a power station of some sort.

“They have something to do with transferring electricity around the place,” Tessa explained as we walked around it. “What, do they not use electricity in the future world?”

“Of course we do, but most buildings have contained fusion generators,” I explained. “Not much use running cables when running your own generator is easier and cheaper. Plus, nobles get to charge us for proper fuel canisters.

We entered the gated-off area through the back, where most of the fence had fallen after its supports had rusted through. It didn’t take long for either of us to realize what this crate’s danger was, as we could hear the hum of electricity running through the system.

“There is no fucking way that this would normally still be running,” Tessa pointed out, eyes following the cables and wires connecting everything. “I mean, it’s not connected to anything, and electricity stopped working weeks after the Collapse started.”

“Yeah... I’m guessing noble fuckery,” I responded. “I’m guessing that a lot of the challenges around the crate are at least partially instigated by them.”

“...You know, that makes sense,” Tessa said, her face scrunched a bit as she considered something. “I’ve never heard of a nest of screamers as big as the one we snuck through. And the way you described the parking structure before I met you? That sounded off too.”

“Well, this just about confirms it,” I said, looking around before following my map to find the crate. “I guess just don’t touch anything?”

Tessa scoffed at the obvious observation as we walked deeper into the power station, eventually finding the challenge.

Some of the structures had partially collapsed in a way that they were leaning on each other, with just enough space for someone to crawl. We walked around the pile of humming metal and confirmed that the cache was inside.

“Fuck, alright, I’ll-“

“Shut up, I’m going to do it,” Tessa said, rolling her eyes and holding up her hand when I tried to respond. “Leon, I’m smaller than you. It’s going to be much easier for me. Now hold my bag.”

She quickly pulled off her pack and dropped down, looking at the space while chewing her lip. After a moment, she nodded and started to crawl, making her way into the dangerous and restrictive space.

“Almost... there... Got it!” She called out before the sounds of shuffling started to get closer.

When she returned, carefully pulling the small, briefcase-sized green crate out from the space last, she handed it to me while I returned her backpack. We slowly made our way back out of the dangerous area, stopping once we returned to the road. I swiped my arm and pulled out our prize.

“A knife?” She asked, sounding a little underwhelmed. “That’s... useful, I guess. What’s special about it?”

It was a combat knife, a bit on the small side, with a three-inch black blade with a brown ribbed handle. It came with a brown leather sheath as well. I scanned it along my arm, reading the description before laughing and shaking my head.

“It’s a safety knife,” I explained. “It will cut just about everything *except* living tissue of any kind.”

“What? That’s fucking useless!”

“Not quite.”

I dropped the case, as it was useless at this point, instead pulling the blade from its sheath. It vibrated lightly in my hand, barely noticeable as I whipped my hand out and sliced at a nearby stop sign. The knife cut halfway through the metal post like it wasn't even there, molten rivulets of metal spattering away from the cut. Then I slid the blade across my face, the metal dragging against my cheek without leaving a single mark.

“It uses some sort of energy projection along the edge. I've used one before, at the garage,” I explained, scrutinizing the edge of the knife. “Of course, that one looked more like a tool and less like a combat knife. And this one is already almost out of its charge.”

“Huh... Okay, yeah, that might be useful,” She admitted, accepting it when I handed it to her. “As long as you don't confuse it with your normal knife.”

“Mhmm. Best keep it separate.”

She nodded and thought for a minute before smiling and attaching it to the strap of her backpack, clipping it into place, and testing it. When it stayed in place securely, she nodded.

“Alright, let's go.”

We made good time for the next few hours, skipping lunch to make an even better time. Both of us were nervous about what we would eventually find, as well as what kind of threat the savager camp would provide.

We made camp as the sun started to set, this time climbing up into an attic space of a random house. The attic was only accessible by an extendable ladder, which Tessa pulled up once we had climbed up. Thankfully, the space was mostly empty, with just enough room for us to crawl around and sit down.

“Why are you so strict about what kind of places we sleep in?” I asked once we had settled in. “I mean, how is this better than just locking the doors downstairs?”

“Well, first off, it’s hidden. Anyone walking around outside or even downstairs will most likely just miss us unless they are really good trackers,” Tessa explained, passing me a can of cold soup, some sort of chicken noodle. “And the second is that I have no idea what kind of mutants claim this area. If it was a couple of displacers or even skelly-wolves, then yeah, locking the door downstairs would probably be enough. But if we stumbled into the territory of bigger, more dangerous mutants? They could tear through those doors like cardboard.”

“So you gotta stay out of reach,” I finished, slurping up some of the cold noodles. “Or hide somewhere they won’t be able to break into.”

“Pretty much. Moving around helps. If you stay too long, something big is bound to notice,” She explained. “Places like this, the motel, or that basement covers the small chance that something just happens to stumble into you.”

The next day went much like the day before. We woke up as the sun was rising, heading out of the house after a quick look around the kitchen. As we traveled, constantly checking my map as we did, we picked through a few more places, looking for food and water. While we didn’t find any more water, we did find food and more soda.

“I’m honestly surprised it took so long for us to find some,” Tessa said, checking out the five red cans. “According to my grandparents, it was pretty popular.”

“Same back home, though most people owned the drinker machine since they were cheaper,” I said, packing away the can of chili and the two cans of vegetables.

“A what?”

“Drinker Machine. It was a little box you kept in your fridge, that you hooked up to your cold water dispenser,” I explained, following Tessa as we left the house. “It made like thirty brand-named drinks at the push of a button. All you had to do was refill its mix cartridges every month or so.”

“That sounds handy, pretty high-tech.”

“Not really, it’s old tech, practically ancient, and the drinks are just as bad for you as that stuff is,” I explained, gesturing to one of the cans. “The new house my family moved into? It has cups that do it automatically. You can switch drinks at the press of a button, and the stuff they use to flavor it breaks down harmlessly in your stomach. It might as well be fucking magic compared to what we had at the old apartment.”

Tessa snorted and laughed, shaking her head as we walked.

“Well, it pretty much all sounds like magic to me,” She said. “I’m an idiot for believing you.”

“I’d make a joke about that, but I don’t want to minimize how much I appreciate that,” I comment after a long pause.

Tessa just waved my comment away.

We made good time, following the map as best we could. We eventually curled slightly from the direct path because we wanted to climb a slight hill that we noticed as we got closer and closer. It was early afternoon when we eventually stopped walking, having found what Tessa insisted was the perfect vantage point.

“Look, I know it’s a bit sketchy, but it looks down into the slight valley the camp is,” She insisted, tugging at the metal rungs of a ladder. “Don’t be a baby. It’s not that high.”

It was a rather large water tower, one that I'm pretty sure was already old during the Collapse. The structure that held up the large water vessel was rusted in spots but seemed stable. Tessa was not interested in waiting for me to decide what I wanted because she started climbing immediately after calling me out.

It was a bit of an uncomfortable climb, as the metal rungs weren't exactly easy on the hands, and the metal railing that encircled the ladder kept catching on my backpack. When I eventually reached the top, I found Tessa sitting on the water reservoir's walkway. She was focusing intently in the distance, using her glasses to study the camp. I could see a gray column of smoke rising in the distance

"Well, you're in luck. It isn't a fortress," She commented when I sat down next to her. "They basically tore apart a building and set up camp. Here, take a look."

I accepted the glasses and looked down at where the smoke was coming from. Sure enough, what had once been a probably normal-looking office building had been partially gutted, with walls removed to create open areas. I could see they managed to turn one corner of it into some sort of barn and pen for their horse mutants, while another seemed to have been made into a lookout point.

The smoke seemed to be coming from a fire on the roof, where they appeared to be smoking some sort of meat. A massive pelt of some kind was also strung up on a rack. I passed the glasses back to Tessa.

"Any idea what kind of animal they got that hide from on the roof?"

She peered through her glasses, focusing for a moment before chuckling darkly.

"Well, that explains what the purple cache was guarded by. That's an ursa hide, and there's another one right next to it," She

answered, tapping her glasses and leaning back against the reservoir behind us. “An ursa is a bear mutant, just under twice as big as one of the tuskers we fought. If they just stumbled on a pair of them, it’s a miracle anyone made it back. It also explains why they were going so slowly. They were dragging them back with them.”

“And our crate.”

“And our crate,” She agreed, nodding along.

“So, now we wait? Watch them for a while?” I asked, looking back out at the just barely discernible building.

“That’s right. Until I’m sure it’s not a suicide mission,” Tessa responded. “But first, we need better cover. We are a bit easy to spot against this white tower.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

We ended up moving around on the platform until we were hiding from the camp behind the curve of the water reservoir. From there, Tessa could monitor the camp with her zoom glasses, and we wouldn't be nearly as noticeable.

As Tessa watched the camp, I went down the ladder to inspect some nearby houses for supplies and for a place to sleep. I immediately noticed that these houses were empty and ransacked. I could even make out some of the tracks, mainly shoe prints in the dust, that the people who had scavenged there before had left behind.

I found no food or anything helpful, but the second house I inspected did have a second floor in their garage, which was only connected by a wooden staircase. I gave it a quick tug and confirmed that the stairs could easily be torn down, making the second floor relatively secure. A brief investigation of that floor showed a small apartment, complete with a bathroom and kitchen.

I spent a while longer going through another house, but after it became apparent it was also cleared out, I gave up and returned to Tessa, climbing up the cold metal ladder again. This time I made sure my backpack was on a bit tighter, keeping it from yanking at me as it got caught on the ladder cage.

"No luck?" Tessa asked as I finally reached the top, sitting down behind her.

"With food, no. This entire neighborhood has been picked clean," I responded. "Looks like we have a time limit."

"We have about two days worth of food and water, maybe three if we are willing to stretch it out," She responded. "I would be more concerned about water, but the health serums more or less solves that. I'm not drinking unpurified and unfiltered water unless it's

absolutely necessary, but it's on the table. But at that point, we will really start to feel it."

"Which is an even bigger problem now that we have body enhancements, for me especially," I pointed out, Tessa humming in agreement. "So we have to make a choice...."

"Do not rush me, Leon," Tessa warned, still looking at the camp. "I've already seen some injured walking around, and the camp does look emptier than I would have expected, but if you rush me, you won't like the answer. This is a big deal, and I'm not rushing into it."

I nodded and leaned back against the water tower, pulling out my canteen and taking a sip. It was from my own canteen, so it was warm, but it was cool enough this high into the air that it didn't really matter. We talked a bit, and I explained the garage apartment I had found, which Tessa agreed was good enough for one night.

Time passed slowly, and eventually, I fell asleep, dozing while Tessa kept watching the camp. Sometime later, she shook me awake, the sky significantly darker than it had been when I had closed my eyes.

"C'mon, let's get to that garage you found," She said, already heading to the ladder. "And your watch shift is going to be longer tonight since you just got a bunch of sleep."

We made our way across the street and behind two houses, arriving at the garage. I climbed the steps, and Tessa quickly knocked down the stairs, which had been even weaker than I realized. I pulled her up to the platform that the door opened up onto, both of us heading inside and closing the door. Tessa found a halfway decent chair to sit on while I claimed the couch.

"So?"

"From what I can tell there are seven of them, and three of them are injured," She explained, rubbing her face. "They are clearly

recovering from something, and I saw them put an injured carrion down as well.”

“That’s good, right?” I asked, sitting forward in my seat. “How bad were the injuries?”

“They were walking around, and seemed aware,” She answered with a shrug. “What do you want, a detailed diagnosis? They seemed lost. My guess is that they lost a leader and enough other people that they are trying to figure out what to do.”

“All I’m hearing is encouraging things,” I pointed out, which earned me a dusty pillow to the face.

“Leon, if we do this, we are likely going to have to kill most of them,” She pointed out while I was coughing. “Do you really want to do this?”

“Tessa, I don’t want to do any of this,” I answered after recovering from my coughing fit. “But the way you’ve been describing these people... they kind of sound like they need putting down anyway. I’m not going to lose sleep over putting down crazy, murdering, rapist, cannibal people. I’m not going to enjoy it, but...”

“Yeah...Alright.”

We spent an hour reviewing plans for getting our hands on the container and discussing what we could run into. We quickly realized there were three main problems. One was that we had no idea how big or small the purple crate would be. I had no idea what it could contain, and if it was something big, then chances were that I would have to focus entirely on carrying it, meaning that Tessa would be the only one to deal with threats.

The second was that the savagers were clearly listless, which was good because they seemed to be paying less attention, but we had no idea where they would be. There were no standardized patrols or patterns, as far as Tessa could tell at least.

The third problem had to do with how the savagers were armed. It seemed that a few of the mutated humans were carrying around crude bows, while all of them seemed to have some sort of melee weapon. As far as Tessa saw, none of them were armed with guns, but we honestly had no way of knowing what they were hiding deeper in the building.

“With how much raiding they do, it’s almost guaranteed they are better fighters than you,” Tessa pointed out. “The only way for you to come out on top fighting close up like this is the stuff we have pulled from crates.”

As far as we could tell, the crate was somewhere in the back corner of the building, not near the exterior wall, unfortunately, but close enough to convince us that trying to sneak in the back was our best bet to get the crate without fighting. Neither of us was afraid of fighting if it came down to it, but we both would much rather just steal it out from under their noses.

Eventually settled on a plan, we ate a small dinner, and I claimed the only bed in the apartment, sleeping for a few more hours before Tessa woke me up for my shift. It was a boring six hours, but I found a stack of magazines to pass the time. It was interesting to read the articles and try and puzzle out what they were talking about.

The following day, after we had some breakfast and drank the last of the bottled water, we headed out. The first part of the plan was to spend the entire morning circling the camp, taking a long, overly cautious route around it so we could enter from the back.

During that time, we both stayed almost completely silent. Gone was the amicable chatting we had enjoyed the last few days, replaced by a rising tension that occasionally spiked when we heard random sounds or thought we spotted something. Several times we crossed clear signs of patrolling savagers, including a few spots Tessa thought were sentry points. Luckily they seemed to be completely empty.

“It gives a view of the entire road,” She pointed out quietly as we stopped by a building that had one corner on the top floor deliberately opened up. “They would have seen us way before we saw them.”

“Would they have spotted us yesterday?” I asked, looking around nervously.

“If someone had been here, probably. But they aren’t on alert or anything, so I assume it was empty when we came through as well.”

“That makes sense if the party transporting the case returned a few days ago.”

We were an hour into the journey and getting closer and closer to our goal when I noticed we were passing by a white crate on the map. I pointed it out to Tessa, who simply shook her head and kept walking. I would have told her that I agreed and that I was just showing her to let her know, but we were approaching the point that talking might actually give our position away.

When we finally stopped, we were only a few buildings down from the office building that the savagers were living in, and I had to admit they had chosen well. It was built in the middle of a large clearing, meaning there was plenty of time for us to be spotted once we left cover. It was also by a large pond, which was fed from a pipe and seemed to actually have some current. I couldn’t imagine it was even remotely clean, but it would be fine after it was boiled and filtered.

From the back, we could see a few more walls around the outside were torn down, leaving more places for them to look out of. Some of these spots looked like guard posts, while others looked like someone with a sledgehammer wanted a balcony. The entire structure was decorated in an ungodly collection of human and mutant bones, metal, plastic trinkets, and anything else the savagers

seemed to think was cool. There were a surprising amount of guns pounded into the wall with nails or spikes, some even hung up by wires.

The smell of smoke and cooking meat hung over the area, both coming from the smoking spit up on the roof. Even from where we were, we could hear the sounds of people talking, low murmurs broken up by the occasionally louder curse, or even a few pained groans.

After a few minutes of waiting and watching, I put my hand on Tessa's back. She looked back at me, and I nodded towards the building, mouthing that it was now or never. For a moment, she chewed her lip before finally nodding. We both turned back towards the building, and after another few more seconds, we broke cover.

We rushed across the street, crossing the tall overgrown grass surrounding the building. Our eyes continuously scanned the structure itself as well, looking out for any sudden movements or signs that anyone had noticed our arrival. When we reached the building, we crouched beside the wall, below the heavily windowed exterior walls. Silently we waited for any noise that would signify that someone had spotted us.

After a full minute with no alarm, we slowly made our way along the wall, eventually stopping by one of the few demolished spots that were on the ground floor. The front had one that was where the savagers were keeping their carrion colts, but along the back, it was just an open space, some sort of back door.

As Tessa stepped closer, she slowly readied an arrow, unclipping it from along her bow and stringing it up, holding her weapon at the ready. She peeked around the corner, checking out the interior with me behind her. After a few seconds, she pulled back and nodded to me, before pulling away from the wall and stepping inside.

The very beginning of the space was torn up and worn down, with the carpet and floor stained by moisture. The further we stepped in, however, the less dilapidated it was. It was still a fucking mess, with the walls decorated similarly to the exterior, though there were fewer bones. Signs, paintings, and other “decorations” covered the interior walls, blocking windows into different rooms.

When we reached the end of the hallway, we stopped and Tessa once again peaked around the corner. This time she immediately pulled back and looked at me, mouthing that someone was in the hall, and getting closer. I looked around and spotted a door on the opposite side of the hallway. I crossed the halfway quickly and stepped inside, Tessa following me. I closed the door immediately, and both of us leaned against it, listening as someone slowly walked past, making their way to the entrance we had just come from.

When they silently walked past I sagged against the door with relief. Tessa did as well until she turned away from the door. She tensed immediately and grabbed my arm, pointing across the room. In a small cot-like bed, there was a single savager, heavily bandaged and unconscious.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I had to bite my lip to keep from cursing when Tessa pointed out the unconscious man just six or seven feet away. For a moment, I thought he was dead, as his breathing was so shallow and slow that his chest was hardly moving. After sharing a look, we both stepped closer, looking down at him.

The sight of the savager a few days ago had been shocking, with their obvious mutations, but even that hadn't prepared me for a close-up look. The heavily injured man was covered in off-white and blood-stained bandages, his chest, left leg, and head wrapped extensively. But even with that much of his body covered, it was clear he wasn't normal.

His hair was a dark red, his skin a shade of blue that looked incredibly unnatural, almost to the point of looking like someone had dyed his skin. His body was swollen in odd places, and while that might have been caused by his injuries, the rest of his mutations were not. His left arm was considerably longer than his right and his right hand had two extra fingers. His right eye was substantially larger than his left, while his nose was crooked on his face. Altogether, it was disconcerting and clear proof that *something* was deeply wrong with him beyond his injuries.

Tessa and I shared a long look, both of us debating what we should do. Unfortunately, the decision was made for us when the man started to stir, as if sensing the company in his room. He opened his mismatched eyes, revealing that they were also two different shades of an unsettling level of red. He was confused at first, focusing on both of us. Finally realizing something was wrong, his eyes widened, and he tensed, opening his mouth to scream.

Running entirely on instinct, I clamped his mouth shut with one hand and slammed my fist into his stomach. I heard a rib crack as he expelled the air he had just started pulling into his scream, my fist driving right into his diaphragm. Tessa was just a moment behind

me with her reaction, yanking her knife out from her hip holster and slamming it into his chest.

The man tensed and blood welled quickly around her knife, which, unless his mutations were even more extreme in his organs, had just cut through his heart almost perfectly. She covered the wound with her hand to keep blood from spraying, but it still covered the wall. The man went pale and limp after a few seconds, both of us releasing him after another twenty or thirty seconds. By then, blood was pooling in the bed, dripping slowly to the floor.

Tessa pulled her knife free, and I stood back, both of us pale and shaky. We stared at him for a moment before Tessa finally shook herself free of the stupor and gave me a shove, which was enough to wake me up as well. She looked at me, and I nodded.

This wasn't even close to over yet.

We made our way to the door and listened, confirming that whoever had walked by earlier wasn't right outside the door, waiting for us. With our efforts well and firmly committed now, the literal and figurative blood on our hands proof, Tessa didn't hesitate to crack the door open and peek out. A moment later, she stepped out, and I was hot on her heels.

I could see a twisted looking savager standing by the entrance we had come in from, looking out into the town with a crude bow in his hands, a leather quiver on his back. We quickly left him behind, however, heading deeper into the building. A quick check of the map showed the crate was on the floor above us, meaning we needed to find the stairs up.

We slowly made our way through the heavily decorated space, looking around for any sign of a staircase. After an extremely tense minute of looking from room to room, we finally found the heavy-duty door that meant a stairwell.

With one last look around, we pushed in and started climbing. The stairwell was dark, the only serious light source coming from above us. We climbed slowly, careful not to misstep or trip as we made it to the second floor. The light turned out to be from the open doorway, the door to this floor having been torn off at some point. This time I reached the edge first, and after a look at Tessa, I peeked through the doorway, scanning the space.

The door led out into an empty hallway, but I could hear voices coming from not far away. I motioned for Tessa to be quiet before stepping out into the new hallway, just as plastered with decorations as all the others we had walked through. When we made it to the end, I peeked around yet another corner, this one opening up to a larger space.

A large room had been completely cleared out, with several walls demolished to make it even bigger. Even the ceiling tiles had been stripped down, giving the room a more significant feel. What had once probably been space for cubicles was now a decent-sized gathering space, complete with a fire pit. There were couches, tables, and chairs in a ring around a glowing, decently-sized fire, all heavily worn but serviceable. The smoke from the fire escaped through a crude hole in the ceiling. Another torn-down wall on the far end of the space created a nice clear view of the town around the front of the building.

I could even see the water tower we had been spying from in the distance.

Sitting around the fire were four savagers, all of them with various discolorations and mutations. Two of them were injured, one with bandages on their arm, the other with a crude brace around their leg. One of the two uninjured savagers led the conversation, talking to the rest and trying to convince them of something. As Tessa and I listened in, they explained that they needed new blood to recover from their losses. He had some exciting ideas about expanding their ranks, and they should all accept him as their leader since he clearly knew what to do.

The casual way he talked about kidnapping younger people from vulnerable towns made me grip my axe tightly. I could hear Tessa grinding her teeth next to me.

As the crazy savager continued to talk, I continued to scan the room, knowing the map had shown the crate to be around in this area. Sure enough, against a wall not far from the circle was a purple crate, a foot and a half tall, three feet long, and two feet deep. Next to it was a broken crowbar, a large sledgehammer, and some sort of metal wedge.

I turned to point it out to Tessa, only to find her eyes wide and focused on a closer wall. It took me a moment for my brain to compute what I was looking at. Each of the walls around the gathering area was decorated with human bones. Hung from the joint where the ceiling met the walls were dozens of skulls, all strung together with rope. Most of the skulls were average adult sized, but more than a few were smaller. Tessa took an involuntary step forward and kicked a scrap of metal that had blended into the dirty and shredded carpet. It clinked and clattered a few feet across the floor. Both of us pulled back to lean against the wall, just out of sight.

The room fell silent.

“Cleaver, that you? I thought I told you to keep watch?” The voice of the man trying to convince the others of his plan called out. “Hey! I’m fucking talking to you!”

Neither of us responded, anger, panic, and revulsion mixing together to freeze us in place. The preaching bastard continued to shout at us before yelling at another one to drag us out, still assuming we were one of their compatriots.

As their footsteps got closer, Tessa let out a breath and, without another word, stepped around the corner. She drew her arrow back and fired, the twang of her high-performance compound bow filling the room. The arrow left from her bow and disappeared from my view as she fired past the corner. With a curse, I stepped

around the corner as well, just in time to see the savager that had been getting closer fall to his knees, drooling blood and clutching at the arrow jutting from his throat.

The rest of the savagers reacted with impressive speed, all of them armed and standing before Tessa's target fell to the ground completely. The leader, by far the biggest, stood and hefted a cruel-looking hammer with a spiked metal head that looked like it had been crudely forged after the Collapse. Its hilt was the end of a huge femur, yellowed and weathered over time, too big to be human.

They shouted and screamed, charging at us with a fervor that was shocking, especially since, just moments ago, they had been sitting and talking. Next to me, Tessa drew and fired a second arrow, which slapped into one of the injured and bandaged raiders. They tumbled and fell, tripping a second one up for a moment. I saw Tessa drop her bow and pull out her machete as I turned to focus on the seeming leader.

He saw me coming for him and smiled wide, laughing and showing off his broken and abnormally large teeth. As I got closer, I could see his skin was green in some places and gray in others. The back of his skull was off in some way I couldn't quite identify, and I could clearly see his nose was flat, almost non-existent on his face. He was big, muscled, and mean-looking, with a maze of scars across his arms and shoulders.

His laugh was maniacal and cruel as he effortlessly vaulted a couch and smashed his spiked mail down at me. I had just enough time to raise my weapon up, the shaft of the maul slamming into the shaft of my axe. Despite the massive weight of his weapon and his considerable size advantage, my enhanced strength stopped his swing dead in its tracks. He seemed shocked that I had blocked it so well, while I was reasonably surprised that the axe handle hadn't just snapped.

He screamed and tried to shove me, but I sidestepped and let his weapon slide off my axe. He tried to swing again, but his

unwieldy weapon took too long, and I was able to slam the butt of my axe into his chest. The leather and whatever else his armor was made of took the brunt of my hit, but it stunned him long enough for me to swing my axe around and slam the head into his side, cutting through the armor and into his ribs. His shouting turned into pained screams, continuing as he tried to push me away. I let him push me slightly, giving me a bit more room as he stumbled back, falling to a knee.

I repositioned slightly and stepped forward, swinging my axe around to finish him off. Unfortunately for me, he saw this coming. Even as I was swinging my axe down to slam into his skull, he pulled a crude knife from somewhere on his belt and stabbed at me. The blade sank into my thigh, sinking to its hilt and sticking there as he went limp, my axe cleaving into his brain.

I cursed and looked down at the blade, my adrenaline turning what should have been an excruciating wound into a dull, spreading ache. After confirming that it was firmly in my leg, and that the fucker who put it there was a twitching corpse, I looked up just in time to watch Tessa, who was now sporting a bloody lip, slam her machete into the last savager's neck. He gurgled blood that was a dark shade of *blue* before collapsing to the ground.

"You good?" I asked, Tessa nodding and looking over at me.

Her eyes went wide, and at first, I assumed she had spotted the knife in my leg.

"I'm fine, it's not bleeding too bad and-"

Something small, metal, and cold pressed against the back of my head, hard enough that it forced me to look down for a moment.

Chapter Thirty-Four

My brain put the fact that I had a gun to my head pretty fast, before the bastard who was holding it even said anything. My heart plummeted, and for a moment, I thought that that was it, that I had seconds to live before whatever cannibal, half-mutated, corrupted fuck had managed to sneak up on us blew my head from my shoulders.

“You FUCKING BASTARDS!” The mutated savager behind me screamed. “I’m going to blow your fucking brains out, cut out your heart and eat it!”

He jammed the barrel of a gun against the back of my head again, grinding against my skull. I could feel a slight tremble through it, his anger bruising my neck. A thousand thoughts raced through my head, ranging from the fact that I hoped my family wasn’t watching to that Tessa would be okay if he pulled the trigger. I even considered calling his bluff, challenging him to the fact that he even had ammo for his weapon.

“I’m gonna feed you to the carrions, you FUCKING FUCK! I’m gonna make her watch!” He screamed, “But not before I fucking-“

As he screamed and shouted, I slowly raised my hands, dropping my axe and looking at Tessa. Her eyes were still wide, occasionally darting down to where she had dropped her bow before looking back up at the lunatic behind me.

“Is there really any reason to do that?” Tessa asked, her hands forward, reaching out as she tried to negotiate. “It’s already over, and if you kill him, I will take you down. Why waste the bullet? Just leave-“

“I’m not fucking going anywhere, you dumb bitch!” He screamed, spittle flecking against the back of my neck. “Once the rest of the crew comes back, we are going to pass you around like-“

The insane human scum kept screaming and shouting, his threats becoming more disturbing. I caught Tessa's eye and looked pointedly at where she dropped her bow before starting to count down.

I got down to one as the spiraling savager began describing, in visceral detail, what pieces of me he would cut off first and how he would force me to watch him and the carrions eat it when I activated my glove. I had turned my hand as I raised it, pointing the palm backward and down slightly, though it was still pretty close to my ear.

A blinding flash of light and a deafening bang exploded from my left palm, hitting my body like a visceral slap. I had planned to drop to the ground, but found myself being sent there regardless of what I did or did not want. My mind was spinning, a jumbled mess from the flash of light and intense bang. I could feel a warmth dripping from my left ear, blood leaking out as the explosion had destroyed my left eardrum. I could only hope that the healing serum would fix it eventually.

I rolled and pushed away, now laying on my back looking listlessly back at the savager with a gun, still stunned and disoriented by the force and flash. I turned my head just in time to see Tessa stand, pull, and release an arrow, all in a smooth motion. It slammed into the still-recovering savager's shoulder, rocking him back. He screamed, both of his ears dripping blood, but it sounded much further away than it should have, a loud whining sound covering up most of his volume.

Unfortunately, he didn't fall yet, and the pain seemed to have brought everything back into focus because he started raising his pistol and pointing it at Tessa. She was already readying her next arrow, but she wouldn't be ready in time. I did the first thing that came to mind, reaching down and yanking the knife out of my leg, hurling it at him as hard as I possibly could.

Since I had no idea how to really throw a knife, the crude weapon slapped against his face, cutting his cheek but not doing any real damage. It did, however, distract him long enough for Tessa to draw another arrow and send it across the fire pit. This shot hit his stomach, and he folded over immediately, shouting in pain. I started to stand, but Tessa drew another arrow and stepped closer, shooting him directly in the skull with a meaty and final thunk.

The room was silent for a long while, both of us breathing heavily. The high-pitched whine that had been covering everything slowly started to fade, letting the sound of the crackling fire and slight breeze reach me. My left ear was still silent, but my right was slowly recovering.

“Where are the rest of them?” I asked, struggling to sit up.

“I don’t know, let’s not-“

Shouting and the sound of clipping hooves came in from the outside, echoing through the opened wall. It was hard to tell, but it was definitely more than the one or two remaining savagers we thought were left.

“We need to get out of here,” Tessa hissed unnecessarily, starting to help me up, her bow clipped to her side. “Why the hell did you throw the knife that was in your leg? You have your own knife!”

“Because I wasn’t thinking straight, believe it or not!” I fired back, pulling away from her once I was standing and hobbling to the crate. “Grab your arrows!”

For a moment, I thought she would tell me to leave the crate, but after a second, she nodded and started yanking her arrows out of the corpses. She was most of the way done before shouts began to come from inside the building. It seemed like a group of them had been nearby, returning from a scouting mission or something, and they had heard the flashbang.

As they shouted, calling for their compatriots to respond to them, I hefted the crate onto my shoulder before both of us rushed out of the fire pit area and down the wall, Tessa looking down into the dark stairwell as I caught up at a hobble. The sound of footsteps echoed up the stairs, and soon a single person came around into the light cast down the stairs from the doorway.

With a grunt, I threw the crate at them, the box catching them squarely in the chest at the bottom of the last set of stairs. It slammed into them and bowled them over, a crunch and meaty smack echoing over the stairs. Tessa and I rushed down, and I grabbed the crate, barely checking to make sure that the savager wouldn't be a problem anymore. When his only reaction to a swift kick was to twitch and groan, we moved on.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, we both took a couple of breaths, nodding to each other before Tessa pushed the door open and stepped through. Rushed as we were, she forgot to check both directions, and an arrow flew across the room and impaled itself into her shoulder.

"Fucking bitch!" She screamed, stumbling back.

I stepped past her and held the crate up, another arrow breaking against the purple metal casing.

"Tessa? You good?"

I looked over my shoulder in time to see her tear the crude wooden arrow out of her shoulder, grinding her teeth and grunting in pain as she did.

"I'm fucking fine! C'mon!" She shouted, leading the way out of the same hall we entered from.

I assumed the guard that had almost caught us earlier had been who I crushed with the crate, as there was no one to stop us from leaving. I pulled the crate back over my shoulder, both of us

running as fast as we could across the gap. As Tessa sprinted and I hobbled as quickly as I could, more arrows peppered the ground, a few of them getting close and one even hitting my back but failing to penetrate my jacket. They screamed and shouted at us as we ran, calling for our blood and promising to do horrendous things to us.

Even as we turned the corner behind a building, neither of us stopped. We rushed down one street, then another, but we could already hear the pounding of hooves catching up to us. Tessa looked over her shoulder and cursed, skidding to a stop and pulling me into an alley.

“Why are we stopping?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Tessa said nothing, simply nocking an arrow and stepping back out from the alleyway. She fired immediately, and I looked around into the street, just in time to see a mutated savager roll off their mutated horse, screaming and shouting while tumbling along the ground. She had an arrow in her stomach but was clearly still alive as she cursed and screamed out to her friends. I quickly ran from my cover and crossed the distance between us, finishing her off with an axe strike to her skull, making a mess in the process.

The mutated horse abomination, who had run in a circle after its rider fell off, focused on me, staring me down. Not looking away from the mutant horse for a second, I reached down and pulled the arrow out of the dead savager. When it was free, I slowly stood up straight and started walking backward, away from the large, dangerous carnivore. Before I could make it back to the alley, however, another savager rode into the street, immediately zeroing in on me. This time Tessa hit the carrion in the throat long before they reached me. The animal and the rider stumbled and fell, making plenty of noise.

I charged forward to kill the mutated rider before they could recover from their fall, the carrion already dead by the time I checked on it. The street was now quiet, so I rushed back to Tessa, handing her the arrows I had recovered.

For a while, we waited silently, listening to the threats, curses, and violent promises the remaining savagers were shouting. After a full minute, I turned to Tessa.

“Can we please be done with this?” I asked. “If we haven’t gotten them all, I don’t think they will be able to sneak after us. The carrion’s aren’t exactly quiet.”

“Yeah, fine, alright. I think we’ve done enough,” Tessa said, clipping the bow under her arm. “Let’s go.”

We headed out, skirting past the surviving carrion and heading down the road. We stopped to bandage ourselves a few streets later before putting as much distance between the camp and ourselves as we could, purple crate in tow.

Chapter Thirty-Five

It took us four days to get home, and almost the entire time was miserable. We pushed ourselves to our absolute limits for the first two, putting as much distance as possible between the savager camp and us. We were pretty sure that they wouldn't be able to follow us, but there was no reason to tempt fate.

While our injuries had mostly healed by the morning of the third day on our way home, we were still sore, tired, slowly becoming dehydrated, and quickly running out of energy. It got bad enough that when we finally arrived at the APC, we both immediately finished off the already-cleaned and boiled water that was waiting for us. Luckily it had rained significantly on the second day coming home, and while that only made the trip more miserable, it meant we had plenty of water in the rain trap. Both of us showered and cleaned our clothes before setting foot into the APC. Neither of us wanted to contaminate the interior.

We took two days after that to recover, both mentally and emotionally, from what he had just endured. Between the traveling, the fighting, and the constant, unrelenting stress, we were both completely drained. We slept well past noon the first night back, enjoying the first stress-free and whole night's sleep since we left. When we woke up, neither of us felt ready to do anything, our bodies finally showing the effects of what we put ourselves through. The healing serum seemed to help with some of the recovery, but only time would soothe the stress.

By the third day home, we were both doing much better and beginning to feel the effects of being cooped up. We went on a basic scaving run to solve that, clearing out a half dozen houses. It was busy work for the most part, as we had a solid stockpile of canned food, both pre-Collapse and more recently, canned from John's delivery from Bakersfield.

It was also just about keeping us both occupied and active since we were starring in a live media presentation. On top of that, I needed to get used to the newest addition to my load out, the contents of the purple crate we had worked so hard to retrieve.

We had cracked open the purple crate during the first night on our return trip, finding a flexible, black metal undershirt that was similar to the flashbang glove I already wore. It was lined with glowing red highlights that pulsed slowly, though it was subtle enough that it didn't shine through my shirt.

A quick scan showed that it projected a protective barrier around me, some sort of shield that stopped impacts that would hurt me but did not affect me when I was moving around or trying to pick something up. It was strong enough to block a swinging axe or machete, though it took ten seconds to recharge after absorbing an impact like that. According to the scan, it could also stop arrows and bullets, but if it did, the recharge time would be measured in hours. Depending on the caliber of the bullet, it might even take as long as a day. It did nothing for something like fire, or electricity.

It was exactly the kind of thing I wished I had on me when being held hostage at the end of a gun.

The debate on who should get the protective barrier was short, with Tessa refusing to take it. She admitted she would have loved to have it, but since I was consistently stepping forward to hit things with my axe, I should be the one to use it. After I put it on, I realized the entire conversation was moot, as it required my implants to work anyway.

Tessa threw a rock at me when I admitted that, the small stone hitting the barrier and dropping to the ground. That was coincidentally when we learned *why* the implants were needed, as I could feel the countdown for the recharge, like some sort of strange phantom sensation in my head.

After a few days of taking it easy, scaving around town, and stocking up on canned food, we headed out on our first cache retrieval since the purple crate. I felt confident with my new gear and constantly reminded Tessa that I needed to go first as often as possible, as my protective barrier would keep me from being killed out of nowhere by an ambush.

We picked a green chest that was a day's walk away, leaving in the early morning and setting out. On the way, we were attacked by a group of four displacers, the feline mutants attempting to catch us off guard as we crossed a car wreck-filled street. They came after me first, and between my axe, Tessa's bow, and all the equipment we found, we managed to dispatch them with only slight injuries. The worst was a scratch along my thigh that would heal by the time we arrived at the green crate.

The next day was simple, scout the crate, analyze the problem, and figure out how to retrieve our prize without tripping whatever danger was surrounding it. After finding the building the crate was in, we quickly realized that the entire building had been trapped. Some were silly, like nails hidden under carpets, while others were much more serious, like the series of sturdy bear traps hidden under leaves like landmines.

As far as we could tell, the traps had been set a long time ago, way before the cache had been placed there. Either way, Tessa hung out in a tree, watching the area while I made my way inside and through the maze of traps. I was the obvious choice with my extra protection, which turned out to be a good idea, as I missed more than one trap that would have seriously injured me without it.

The reward for navigating the house of traps was a pair of boots, which could drastically increase how high someone could jump. They had a limit to how much height they could add a day, letting someone jump an extra twenty feet a day. It did *not* cushion falls or help people climb, but they did help with the forces involved with the jump. I passed them to Tessa immediately, as the ability for her to get the height advantage would be extremely useful.

I got the feeling that they used some pretty advanced tech, but it was scaled down massively to fit in the green level of rewards. We were also surprised that it didn't require implants, but it seemed like most of the green level rewards didn't

We managed to rush home, returning to the APC the same day. The two-day trip was nothing compared to our previous adventure, but returning to a familiar space was still nice. Unfortunately, the peace didn't last very long. We were sitting in the APC, having just finished dinner, when a knocking resonated through the repurposed armored vehicle.

Both of us froze for a moment before scrambling to get prepared. I quickly pulled on my equipment and grabbed my axe, Tessa reaching over and pulling her pistol from my hip.

"Leon, could you let me in?" A familiar voice coming from outside asked. "Technically, I'm already inside, you know. Let me just...."

Suddenly, a drone faded into view in the far corner of the APC. About twice the size of my fist, it had a prominent sensor bar and an impressive-looking camera system as well. Tessa whipped her gun up and pointed directly at the drone, but I put my hand on her and pushed it down.

"...Ilbryen? Is that you?"

A hologram of the familiar noble was suddenly projected into the back of the APC. His image was smaller than usual, enough to fit in the APC with bending over.

"Hey, Leon! Congrats on surviving this long! And Tessa, it is nice to meet you," He said with a smile, the image flickering the tiniest amount. "I'm here to make you an offer, specifically to you, Tessa!"

Tessa looked at me, and I shrugged. I had a healthy suspicion for all nobles, especially him, but there was no harm in hearing him out. Tessa nodded and lowered her pistol completely, sliding it back into the holster on my hip.

“What’s your offer, rich boy?” She asked challengingly, with enough sass that I had to work at holding back a wince.

“Now that you know why Leon is here and where he is from, there is no reason for you not to participate in the entertainment!” He said. “I am happy to say I have been authorized to offer you a similar deal to what we have with Leon. Survive, entertain, and make us money, and we will raise you to a noble. Continue to entertain, and we will pay you handsomely!”

“What good would that do me?” Tessa asked, her eyes going wide. “Unless you plan on offering me a way off of this hell hole?”

“That’s absolutely correct! Wow, Leon, you are one lucky son of a gun for finding such a smart partner right off the bat.”

“Trust me, I know,” I responded. “How would you get her home? The box I arrived in does not have enough room for two people.”

“That’s why we set up a pair of boxes!” Ilbryen responded, a map appearing next to him, quickly zooming out to show a gold-colored dot a considerable distance away from us. “Make it here, and both of you will be brought back! But be aware this will not be an easy trek! Not only is this not an easy journey, fraught with mutants and other threats, but if you accept this offer, Tessa, the trip will be filled with threats that we create specifically to challenge you! The challenges you face will rival and even surpass what you *should* be facing to obtain purple rewards.”

“I... I need to think it over,” Tessa said after a long moment, looking shaken by the sudden opportunity.

“Unfortunately, time is something I cannot offer,” Ilbreyenn admitted sheepishly. “This offer is only available for a limited time....”

A clock appeared where the map once was, a minute shown on the screen, slowly counting down.

“Tessa!” I said, turning to her and smiling. “This is it! A way to get you out of here!”

“But leaving... Leon, what about my dad?” She asked. “And what about you! He said this would be even harder than what we are doing already, even harder than purple crates... should you really take the risk? You need to get back to your family.”

“Tessa, we have time to prepare. We can find more rewards and get even stronger! By the time we head out to chase down our ticket home, we will be more than ready!”

“But... a new world Leon?” She asked, chewing her lip. “I don’t know if I can handle that....”

“That’s what I’m for,” I assured her with a smile. “You saved my ass here. I’ll keep you safe back home. Tessa, this is your chance to find a real home, not be stuck here until you go crazy from loneliness. I... I don’t want to leave you behind in five months, Tessa.”

She looked at me, a nervous, watery-eyed smile on her face. Before she could respond, Ilbryen coughed and drew our attention.

“About that. If she accepts this, then your time will be cut in half,” He explained with a “what can you do?” shrug. “You’ll have just over two months to get to the golden marker on your map.”

Tessa opened her mouth to say something, but I reached out and took her hand. She looked at me, and I nodded my head with a confident smile. After a moment, she nodded back, took a deep breath, and looked back to Ilbryen’s projection.

“Alright. I’ll take your offer.”

“Good! Congratulations and good luck!”

The projection fizzled out, the drone disappearing back into its invisibility, leaving the two of us “alone.” We were quiet for a long while before I squeezed Tessa’s hand and caught her eyes again.

“We can do this, Tessa. I know we can.”

“Right, you’re right,” She agreed with a sniff and nod, pulling her hand from mine to wipe her face. “We can do this. Alright, Sci-fi boy, get your map up. It’s time to make a plan and get to work.”

Afterwards

Thank you for reading Last Resort: Dimensional Bloodsport! This is my first foray into producing my own, original content, so please let me know what you think through the reviews! Whether it is to offer constructive criticism or let me know how much you loved the story! If you did enjoy the story, consider further supporting me on [Patreon](#)! There are all sort of benefits for showing your support, including monthly updates for my progress and access to my other projects.

I would like to take a moment to thank those who have supported me, both monetarily and with emotionally. My family and friends have been incredibly supportive, and I know I wouldn’t have gotten this far without everyone’s kind words and encouragement. I only hope I can live up to everyone expectations!