

I stood up straight, turning around to look at the woman and the young girl. The woman opened her mouth to say something.

Only for me to turn around and vomit.

My heart was *pounding*, my mind swirling and disoriented, and I could still feel the crack as my machete slammed into the older man's skull. The blood on my face felt hot, thick like paint, and I could feel my hands shaking. Again, my stomach heaved, expelling my lunch as I leaned against the gun range wall.

It took me ten minutes to fully recover, the adrenaline slowly leaving me, and I could finally stand back from the wall. At some point, the woman had sat down on the far wall, the girl sitting beside her. I noticed that there was a red first aid crate next to the woman, and the bandage on her leg looked new.

"I..." I started to say, trailing off awkwardly

"Don't worry about it. Actually, it makes me feel a bit safer," She admitted, rubbing the girl's back. "Gotta think that a cold-blooded killer doesn't throw up like that. Hopefully."

I nodded, turning my head and trying to spit the last bit of the foul taste from my mouth, shaking my head when I failed. I looked around, hoping to maybe find a water bottle or something, before realizing I was still in a shooting range. With a shake of my head, I focused on the woman and the girl.

Now that the action had passed and I had wasted my lunch, I could actually pay attention to what I was looking at. The woman looked to be about my age, maybe a bit older, with light brown hair that she currently had up in a ponytail. She was wearing tight, square-rimmed glasses that framed her heart-shaped face well. The younger girl had black hair worn short to her shoulders. Both of them were blasted with freckles.

"What happened?" I finally asked. "Why were they after you?"

"My brother was a cop," She explained. "A bit of a hardass, too. I knew Jerry had a grudge, but I didn't think he would hold it past the end of the world. Dumbass."

"Yeah... Well, I'm glad I got here in time to help."

"Why were you here, exactly?" She asked, staring at me intently.

"Supplies," I admitted. "Thought the police station would be a good place to start."

"It would have been two or three days ago," The woman admitted. "A bunch of us holed up here, working to survive."

"What happened?"

"At the time we thought someone made a mistake, but Jerry admitted to setting a car alarm off on purpose. Thought it would soften us up a bit," She explained, looking like she wanted to get up and kick the man I had killed. "It worked. The alarm got the attention of everything nearby and brought it straight to us. When we finally fought everything off... Everyone left else packed up and headed out to a national guard base nearby."

"Why did you stay?"

"I would have only slowed them down," She said, gesturing to her leg. "This isn't going to get better, not without clean water to wash with and some proper treatment. Molly was supposed to go with them, but she snuck away and came back."

The girl poked her head up from the woman's shoulder and looked pleased with herself before leaning back in. The woman just shook her head and, for a moment, looked like she was about to cry. The daughter clearly didn't understand that she had basically snuck away from her only chance for survival. That is unless I could convince them to come with me.

"Well... Listen, I have a place that's safe. Easily defendable, running water, and protection from the smaller monsters that are wandering around," I explained. "If you'd like, you're welcome to join me."

"How far away?" She asked, staring at me like she was trying to read my mind.

"About a mile and a half, but I can carry you," I assured her confidently. "As long as you don't mind taking breaks."

She chuckled, and after a long look down at the girl, Molly pressing against her side, she nodded.

"Alright, we will join you. But so help me god-"

"No funny business, I promise," I said, raising my hands. "We need to stick together where we can. It's our only chance."

Seemingly satisfied with my words, Alissa introduced herself properly as well as the young girl, her daughter. I helped the injured woman up the stairs, one room away from the entrance. I sat her down in an office chair before quickly leaving. I had two or three hours to spare before we needed to start making our way back to the bastion if I wanted to beat the sunset, and I was going to spend every second looting.

I started back in the basement firing range. There were a few lockers, as well as a desk that appeared to be for the range master as it faced the window that looked into the range. The lockers were all empty, but I found a box of 9mm bullets in one of the desk drawers. It was half empty but better than nothing.

As I left the range behind, I started going through the first floor. Almost immediately, I found a large trauma bag tucked into the corner of one office. It seemed on the older side, but it was still mostly full, and Alissa seemed impressed when I brought it down to them.

"Normally, I would have yelled at someone for keeping an expired kit... but beggars can't be choosers..." Alissa said. "I'll go over it while we are waiting."

"Do you..." I started to ask if she knew what she was looking at, but trailed off when she gave me a pointed look.

"I've worked as a nurse for eleven years," She said, shaking her head. "I know what I'm doing."

"Are you serious?" I asked, sitting down roughly in one of the other office chairs. "That's fantastic. Wait, you're a nurse and they let you stay behind?"

"They... I don't think they knew I was a nurse..." She admitted, her face shifting in shock. "That... fucking hell..."

"There's nothing you can do now," I said, trying to keep whatever dark thoughts forming in her head from overwhelming her. "And honestly, even if they didn't know, they basically abandoned you... Maybe it's a good thing Molly came back."

She frowned and nodded, clearly considering the situation from another angle and not liking what she saw. She shook her head after a moment before focusing on the trauma kit, which prompted me to head back out and get back to work.

The break room turned up some shelf-stable stuff, including three large containers of instant coffee, one coffee creamer, and a few cans of soup and chili. I ignored the large container of water for the bubbler before returning and using it to clean my face and hands of blood and swish my mouth clean.

With the office space done, I started in on the locker room, only to find most of them were still locked. I pulled out my crowbar with a giddy chuckle before cracking them open, one after another. I was rewarded with two full Glock 17s, as well as two full magazines and three empty ones. I also found a bunch of Kevlar vests, some lighter stab vests, and all sorts of standard cop equipment. I knew I couldn't take everything, so after strapping a holster to my hip, sliding in two spare mags, and pulling on one of the vests, I fit as much as I could into my backpack.

In the end, I tossed in two handcuffs, a taser and three reloads, the spare mags and pistol, a couple of beefy looking multitools, a couple of pocket knives, a few sunglasses that I wrapped in what I was pretty sure were clean socks, flashlights, another duffel bag and two bottles of pepper spray. I slung the full pack over my shoulder and grabbed a couple more Kevlar vests before returning to Molly and Alissa. It was hard to leave the remaining stuff behind, especially when there were a few backpacks in the lockers, but I was already overloading myself.

When I got back, I found both of my new friends waiting for me. The original first aid bag was now empty, and the trauma bag looked a bit more full, so I assumed Alissa had successfully combined them into one. I passed them both a Kevlar vest before nodding towards the door.

"Put these on, it's time we started heading back," I said. "It's slow going if we want to stay quiet."

It took a minute to figure out how I was going to carry Alissa, before eventually settling for a good old fashion piggyback ride. It was *not* the most efficient way to carry her, but it would make it much easier for her to hop off if we needed to separate for whatever reason. Molly, who had yet to say a word in front of me, would be carrying my bag until we got to the duffel on our way home.

We stepped out of the police station and immediately stopped. I could feel Molly pressing against Alissa's back, hiding from the blood and gore. As we made our way down the steps, I could feel Alissa shaking her head.

"Makes you wonder if the dusters were the lucky ones," She said, turning her head as we passed by a corpse.

"The what?" I asked, stepping around a lizard corpse, which was buzzing with flies.

"Dusters? You know, on the seventh day?" She asked. "You didn't see any dusters?"

"I live alone."

"Damn... well, on the seventh day, a bunch of people turned to dust," She said, her voice cracking a bit. "They started sparking with energy before it burned them out. Turned them to dust."

"The seventh day... the screaming? I thought people were just snapping because the water finally went out."

"No. It... I don't think I will ever forget it. The people Molly and I were staying with for... while we were in town. They exploded into dust right in front of me. Three people, each sparking with a different color of energy, just... poof."

Alissa stopped talking after that, and I honestly couldn't blame her. Still, we had to move, so we slowly made our way into cover, cutting into an alleyway to walk behind a series of buildings. Molly followed close behind, silently holding on to her mom's jacket and looking around nervously.

The journey was slow, much slower than I had been on the way to the station. We took frequent breaks, not because I needed them, but because I wanted to make sure that Molly was never too tired to run. Our pace got even slower when we reached my stashed duffel bag. Molly looked immediately nervous, which Alissa picked up on.

"I'm not sure she can carry that... at least not for very long," She said softly, "Maybe we can come back for it later?"

"...no, I can carry the backpack if you could get the duffel?" I suggested, Molly hesitantly nodding in agreement.

Alissa looked skeptical as I let her down next to the porch railing so she could lean on it. I ignored her, accepting my backpack and putting it on backward before having Molly tie the straps around my back. I then motioned for Alissa to climb onto my back, getting her into a solid position before testing my new load by bouncing a little bit.

"Alright, I can handle this," I said confidently. "Let's go."

The slow, steady progress continued, weaving through backyards, alleyways, and behind fences. We were forced to cut back and take new routes a few times, but as the sun started to get lower and lower, I could feel us getting closer and closer.

Unfortunately, close isn't worth much.

"To the left," Alissa whispered into my ear, prompting me to turn and look where she was pointing.

I froze and followed her finger, mentally cursing when my eyes finally found what she spotted. Sure enough, between the houses on the other side of the road were two velociraptors, both of them staring at us intently. They were frozen, unnaturally still, their eyes locked onto us. Molly bumped into me from behind as I slowly reached down to where my holstered pistol was.

"You can't shoot them. They need something bigger," Alissa warned, slowly releasing her grip on me. "You need to drop me. Drop me, take Molly, and run. Just take care of her, I-"

"Stop," I said, cutting her off before she could start. "Molly, on the count of three, drop the bag and run. Stay with me, don't look back, and just keep running."

When the young girl said nothing, I mentally cursed. I couldn't carry her if she was frozen. I would drop Alissa if I had to, I wouldn't deny a mother's request like that, even if-

"I can run," Molly said in a whisper, cutting off my own spiral.

"Okay... one... two... three."

Together, we took off, Alissa gripping onto me tightly despite her earlier request to sacrifice her. I reached out and snagged Molly's arm, keeping us together as we ran, keeping her on her feet as she stumbled over a pothole. Alissa bounced on my back, her chin digging into my shoulder.

Behind us, I could hear the velociraptor-like lizards screeching and snapping, the sounds of scrapping and feet pounding on asphalt chased after us. One of them jumped on to a car as they chased us, the sound of scraping metal and breaking glass was enough to give it away. I had to fight my instincts to turn around and look.

We continued to run, my legs burning despite the treatment that Sally gave me, and I practically dragged Molly along with me, pushing us as fast as I could. Despite that, I could hear them getting closer, their shrieks and snapping sounding like it was just behind us.

Suddenly, the road we were running on turned slightly, and the Bastion came into view. Molly stumbled as she saw it, and Alissa gasped. I just poured on a bit more speed, practically dragging Molly with me, the sight of safety driving me forward.

"Just... a bit... more!" I said, gasping for air, ignoring the pain in my legs, ignoring that the lizards were getting closer.

The transition from running on rough, unforgiving asphalt to pleasant, safe grass was incredible. I kept running, making it maybe twenty feet into the clearing before I stumbled and fell to the ground, my legs collapsing out from under me. Molly collapsed right beside me, and Alissa tumbled forward off my back until she was on her ass, looking back at me. Her eyes went wide, and I used my arms to roll over on my back.

I immediately spotted the chasing monsters, who had slid to a stop at the edge of the field. They looked around, snapping and screeching, confused at where their prey had gone, even though we were sitting on our asses not twenty feet away. We stared at them, unable to pull our eyes away until they fully gave up, turned back and plodded away.

I sagged with relief, letting my head fall down onto the thick, comfortable grass. The sky was getting dark, but we had fucking made it.

"Welcome back Aiden!" Sally said, bobbing in the air above us. "I see your mission was successful!"

And that was when the shouting started.