

# LAST RESORT

## THE ROAD HOME



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# Prologue

As always, the investigation of a new target reality for travel purposes posed new and unique challenges. The process is vital, of course, as no one wants another repeat of the Lestronga situation. The still unchosen actor that BA Entertainment plans to send will not have the luxury of the same protections that Mr. Lestronga had. Therefore, a thermonuclear detonation designed to avenge the Alternative Earth should it fall to invasion or to disease will result in a significant loss of investment. This investigation needed to be thorough and detailed to ensure that the chosen actor's struggle to survive is not ended prematurely.

The planetary-wide investigation and analysis started, as many of them do, with a full orbital scan. Three dozen self-orbiting satellites were transferred to reality Alpha-14B4631. When all thirty-six satellites achieved their predetermined orbit, we began scanning for any planetary anomalies. Thirty-five radioactive sites were located that matched High Priority standards, with two hundred and thirty-four lesser sites located around the planet. Thankfully, none of the High Priority sites were located near the intended deployment area.

A superstorm, located on an adjacent continent to the deployment area, was also discovered by the scans. A quantum AI analysis determined that its danger level did not reach High Priority status. The weather prediction software declared it a non-issue for the deployment area.

When the initial planetary scan was completed, twenty-four of the satellites began their secondary purpose, the prevention of cataclysmic meteor strikes. The remaining twelve satellites began a more detailed scan, focused on the planned deployment site and radiating outwards. These scans are attached to the report, as per the client's request.

With the high-detail ground scanning underway, we began the process of sociological and historical study. All twenty-three nearby human or sub-human settlements were thoroughly bugged with a variety of listening devices, with all recorded conversations passing through the company standard psychoanalysis VI program. Seven of the twenty-three settlements were given abnormal danger levels, their locations noted on the high-detail map attached. None of the settlements rated a High Priority status.

Several samples were taken of the sub-humans settlements when their level of aggressiveness was discovered. Between our research and the results of the sample analysis, we have concluded that it is a combination of reduced intelligence, an utter lack of consequences, and an overall decrease in inhibitions and empathy that has resulted in their current state. They seem to lack any concern for their future but are fully capable of producing children or kidnapping new members to keep their numbers stable.

The other, more agreeable settlements could hypothetically pose a threat to the chosen actor early in their deployment tour, but all but two seemed more focused on survival than any

aggressive actions. Barring the actor instigating a response, the chances of them becoming a threat are minimal.

With the settlement surveillance underway, the historical investigation began, starting with our usual methods. Scans around high-population centers were conducted in an attempt to gain access to educational mainframes or records. Unfortunately, due to the breadth of the apocalyptic conditions, the living populace rampantly harvesting ruins for materials, as well as the relatively large amount of time since the start of the Collapse, which is what the natives called their worlds apocalyptic event very little in terms of electronic records had survived uncorrupted. What has been found has been useless in terms of large-scale historical analysis.

With a primary method unavailable, we began scanning for intact educational books, gathering several hundred across the entire planet. After scanning and digitizing them, as well as running them through a VI pattern recognition program, we have concluded that the divergent point of Alpha-14B4631 is the American Revolution. Our own historical records indicate that our version of this war was fought specifically to escape the tyrannical rule of British royalty. Alpha-14B4631's Revolution did focus on the control of the British royalty but also specifically involved a distaste for wealthy individuals and families who did not assist in supporting the less fortunate in a way proportional to their wealth. They had a particular disdain for stagnant wealth or the idea that a wealthy individual would stockpile money that would simply sit in a bank and, therefore, not enrich the community by being spent.

This shift in focus led to early American politics to be focused on lower-class citizens, as the wealthy were considered to already have all they could need. This political focus led to the idea of stagnant wealth being a negative concept, going as far as to consider it un-American. While this did not prevent people from becoming and staying rich, it did mean that a wealthy individual was expected to invest in small business, social works, and charity, their money working and often growing while also improving the lives of others.

Over time, this mentality led to a semi-functional state of trickle-down economics, further affecting the development of the USA. This change pushed across the continents as the world progressed, and US culture spread with their growing economy and influence. Internally, this led to a generally more liberal-leaning government, which focused on making the lower and middle class happy, as through the shift in politics from our own history, the citizens were more aware of the power and influence they held.

In the year 2025, Alpha-14B4631's economy had reached a low point. In order to assist the lower class, the US government began a government buyback program of several "dangerous" items, including firearms, ammunition, and older electronics that contain harmful materials. The more conservative citizens believed it to be a government scheme to disarm the population, but the government maintained it was a fair way to get money into the hands of the people struggling through a recession.

Once the low point in the economy passed, the government program, now affectionately called the "Gun Fund", continued to stay open. Due to the anonymous nature of the process, anyone that needed a quick, questionless infusion of cash could participate. By the year 2035 the program has scrapped one hundred and twenty seven million firearms.

Over the next fifteen years, all the way to 2050, the world continued to slowly but surely demilitarize. Armies were downsized, navy vessels were mothballed or reduced to scrap, and a massive denuclearization effort gained significant traction. The world experienced an unprecedented time of peace, and governments were quick to take advantage of the smaller need for military funding to focus on public works. The number of large-scale armed conflicts steadily shrank until it was almost unheard of. Small-scale conflicts still occurred in high social friction areas, but they rarely spilled out of their local spheres. Military conflict wasn't the only place where violence seemed to have been replaced by peace. Global crime rates fell precipitously, settling at a shockingly low percentage of what it had once been.

It is around this time that textbooks become useless between the gap of "current events" and "history." Early sometime in 2061, a passing comet got caught in the planet's gravity and fell to Earth. The impact was massive, the crater easily visible in our first scans, and occurred inside the limits of Louisiana. An impact of that magnitude would have kicked up hundreds of tons of Earth and dust into the atmosphere, spreading it further northwest.

Almost immediately, reports of weird, mutated animals and plants began making the headlines. Before anything could be done, before a cure could be researched or a warning given, the mutations spread like wildfire across the continent, into the ocean, and onto the rest of the world. Within a week, strange, aggressive dogs were being put down in the streets of China after attacking a couple on a late-night walk.

The mutations were fickle, passing over just over seventy percent of living biomass, turning the other twenty-five into twisted, dangerous creatures. A month after the impact, the first super virus hit Los Angeles, turning it into a dead city in just three days. After that, London went dark, then Hong Kong, and then Tokyo. Billions of people died, and entire cities rioted to death as they tried to escape terrifying viruses.

As the world's cities and large towns choked on diseases and viruses more virulent than anything previously imaginable, the smaller towns struggled with an onslaught of mutated creatures. Farmers woke up to find their herds of cattle ravaged by mutated bulls, while families woke up to find that the family dog was covered in bone plating and incredibly violent. The mutations seem random, with more unique examples popping up every day, with the only connecting factor being that almost all of them grew enraged and violent at the simple sight of a human. When a normal animal would run away in self-preservation, a mutant would charge, sacrificing its life in the vague hope it could take a single human with it.

Humans were not wholly immune to the mutating influence either. Only about fifty percent of the population was immune to the contaminant's effects, while the other fifty were just

as susceptible as any other living creature. However, due to high amounts of exposure, human mutation was almost immediately fatal. We were puzzled by this, as there wasn't really any reason why the contaminant, which we will discuss shortly, would cause that sort of issue. Eventually, the conclusion was reached that the human mind could not handle the stress of being mutated at such a basic level.

When human civilization finally broke, they ceased recording any meaningful information on what was happening to the planet. We can draw conclusions by comparing what we learned with the current state of Alpha-14B4631, but that would be almost entirely postulation.

Perhaps the most important investigation we performed was into the exact nature of the mutations that spread across the globe. The final culprit was a harmless microbe, one that reproduces at an unbelievable pace. While this fast-spawning microbe was harmless, what it produced as a waste product is most certainly not. A previously unknown material that has a massive effect on cellular division, unlocking dormant chains of DNA and causing division to spiral chaotically. This material, however dangerous it may be, is easily purged from the systems, and its effects on human tissue are completely erased by several high-end cancer prevention treatments. We recommend a full decontamination of all returning personnel, as well as treatments for all personnel in contact with the actor prior to decontamination.

The prevailing theory remains that the microbe was either inside the comet and, therefore, extraterrestrial in nature or that the impact of the comet somehow freed this microbe, perhaps from some sort of subterranean cave sealed deep in a Louisiana swamp.

Our final recommendation is that Alpha-14B4631, and more specifically the outline deployment area, is a satisfactory location to deploy BA entertainment assets, as long as biological assets receive proper preventative treatments before departure. We recommend your primary landing position be outside the city limits, as the city you currently have picked out is what many would call a "death trap."

## Chapter 1

I tightened my grip on my axe, my knuckles going white as I anxiously waited. The axe was scratched and dented but still sharp despite the heavy use I had put it through. By now, every inch of its polymer handle was as familiar to me as my own hand. I shifted my chosen weapon slightly as I waited silently outside the building, counting down the seconds in my head. Tessa had another two minutes and thirty seconds to go before I went in after her, despite her assurances she could handle it.

Before I could reach sixty seconds, the brown-haired woman came bolting out of the building, easily jumping through the broken front window. She ran past me and slid to a stop, pulling out her bow and knocking an arrow.

"It's just one of them," She said, preparing to pull the arrow back. "Any second now..."

With a low burbling screech, a giant amphibian, a mutated cross between a frog and a newt, which also happened to be the size of a small pony, leaped out of the dark interior. Its skin was a deep, dark purple, its eyes spinning wildly as if taking every inch of its surroundings at once. Its mouth was open wide, showing off several rows of serrated, dagger-like teeth. Its jaw opened even wider, almost as if it was going to attempt to eat me whole.

I heard the familiar twang of an arrow being fired from behind me as Tessa let an arrow fly, the sturdy rod of synthetic material and the lethally sharp tip whipping by me with a whistle. It embedded five or six inches of itself in the mutated creature's throat, causing it to thrash even as it flew through the air.

Before the large mutant could crash into me, I shifted forward and jabbed out with my axe, slamming the heavy metal end into the monstrous amphibian's face. I could hear the crack of several things breaking as I just barely managed to stop the creature's forward momentum, my feet sliding back a foot or so as my enhanced frame absorbed the impact.

The creature fell to the ground, the burbling, angry screech now turning into one of pain and confusion. It was just managing to recover from the heavy strike to the face when I slammed my axe down between its bulging, darting eyes. Its whole body squirmed and flailed at my swing cracked its skull, its tail curling and slapping against the ground with heavy thumps. Instead of pulling my axe out and losing any connection I had to the mutant, a mistake I had made before, I used my axe to pin it to the ground. After a few seconds, when I was sure it wouldn't suddenly break free, I gestured to Tessa with a nod.

"I've got it, finish it off?" I asked, staying focused on the creature.

My partner made a noise of agreement, and I heard the sound of her machete being pulled from its sheath. With a grunt of force, she slammed her sharpened weapon down into its neck, cutting deep enough to sever its spinal cord. She slashed it again, and this time the squirming and flailing turned into death twitches. I waited a moment longer before putting my boot on its head, yanking my axe free with a wet sucking sound.

"That... went better than I expected," I admitted, tapping the gore off of my axe. "The first one was much more difficult."

"It was also a lot bigger," Tessa pointed out, flipping the dead and bleeding creature out to yank her arrow free. "Just glad we ambushed it. It would have sucked having to deal with both at the same time."

I nodded and looked around, an ingrained habit at this point, scanning the area for any new threats. Eventually, my eyes settled on Tessa, musing on how much we had both changed in the last few months, both looks and equipment-wise.

Neither of us was wearing any regular clothes at this point, trading them out for various pieces from my Earth, all of which we pulled out of white crates. They offered slightly more protection than normal clothes and were much easier to maintain. Tessa was wearing a dark green jacket, similar to mine, except hers also muffled her sounds for thirty seconds twice a day and could also change color on command. We found that in a blue crate a week after Tessa had accepted Illbreyn's offer. She was also wearing a white undershirt and black pants, the same gloves I had given her a month or so ago, and her jump boots, which let her jump incredibly high, but had a limit to how much height they would add to her jumping in a day. Unfortunately, she had already used up all their charges for the day. She also had the same holsters and belts as before, her pistol on one hip and her machete on the other.

I was wearing my shield projecting under armor, the shiny black finish just barely backlit with red glowing highlights. My white undershirt was long gone at this point, and with my chest armor being both breathable and comfortable, I didn't see any reason to replace it. I was also wearing my white crate jacket, my flashbang gloves, and new dark blue pants that we found in a green crate. They didn't do anything actively but would self-repair every two days and were actually properly armored instead of the vaguely protective qualities of the white crate clothing, like my boots and jacket. I also had a new holster on my hip, which held a pistol, one that worked with a magazine rather than a cylinder like Tessa's. We had traded for the pistol and a spare magazine, matching the box of ammo I had found weeks ago. I now had a total of fourteen shots between two magazines.

Of course, not all of our changes were externally obvious, both of us having taken several serums in the last few weeks. Realizing that we had already started leaning toward the roles of tank and ranger through our tactics and the gear we had managed to find in crates, we decided to lean into it. So far, Tessa had taken a speed-enhancing serum, which was actually incompatible with the strength-enhancing serum that I had taken. She had also taken a reflex serum, which had taken her already impressive bowmanship to an incredible level. It also played very well with her speed enhancement, making her damn hard to keep up with over any terrain.

I had taken a single durability serum, which had been a very interesting experience. My bones were now, supposedly, about half again as tough as before, and my skin was noticeably harder to damage. We quickly learned I wasn't a knife or bite-proof, however, and Tessa had been teasingly calling me "abrasion-proof." On top of those, both of us now had an endurance and metabolism serum, the latter of which we found together in a blue crate.

All in all, we had managed to put together an effective array of upgrades and equipment, slowly working our way through all of the crates around our armored home. At this point, we had

stopped going after white crates entirely and focused on green and blue. Tessa was *still* hesitant to go after another purple, though after the ordeal we went through for my shield armor, I couldn't exactly blame her.

"Did you see the crate while you were playing rabbit?" I asked, stepping closer to the window and peering inside.

"No, spotted this fucker the second I reached the bottom of the stairs," She explained. "FYI... I'm gonna go ahead and veto trying to eat this guy."

"What?" I asked, looking over my shoulder in surprise. "Why would we eat that? It smells as bad as it looks."

"And the tuskers didn't?" She said with a raised eyebrow. "Are you going in or what?"

"Yeah, I'm going," I said, stepping through the window space and up onto the raised display platform.

What had once been some sort of clothing store had become the den of the two semi-aquatic mutants we had just finished killing. The ground floor was the standard wrecked, looted, and wrecked again mess most buildings we investigated were, with the far right corner of the building sinking worryingly low. Thankfully, the left back corner, the corner with the stairs to the basement, was mostly intact.

I reached down to my belt and unclipped the double-clasped, foot-wide disk that had been secured to my left hip. It was my lighting drone, encased in a home-stitched cloth binding. With a few simple commands, I activated the drone and instructed it to follow behind me and keep everything lit up. Immediately, the room was almost perfectly lit, with the only dark spots cast by shadow. With the room lit, I slowly made my way to the stairs, my eyes and ears peeled for any sign of more newt-like mutants.

With my axe held at the ready, I put my foot on the stairs, testing it carefully with my weight before slowly making my way down. The basement was a dark, swampy mess, made up of mud, rotted food, and whatever the hell else had been down here. It stank, of course, but after the painful level of stench in the tusker den and the actually dangerous smell of the screamer nest, this was nothing. As I got to the bottom of the stairs I made a quick scan of the now bright room, which revealed that the foundation on one side collapsed inward, and dirt had been excavated to form a small cave that sloped down and away. I let out a sigh before lifting up my arm and rolling up my jacket sleeve.

With a tap on my arm, a holoprojected screen sprung up in front of my eyes, displaying a map that was as zoomed into this building as possible, showing it and four other buildings. Still, it was detailed enough to confirm that the crate we were looking for was most likely in the dugout den.



I groaned and made my way to the small cave, my feet squelching at the mucky, nasty layer of mud and decomposition that covered most of the floor. When I got to the cave, I whistled my light drone over, the small floating disk making its way to me and lighting up the den. Sure enough, in the far back of the den I could see the glint of green metal, half buried under a pile of dirt.

Using my axe as a makeshift shovel, I managed to dig out the crate and hook it out, dragging it closer until I could reach out and grab it. I scraped off as much of the mud and filth as I could before heading back up the stairs. I quickly climbed out of the window to find Tessa waiting for me, sitting on the partially crumpled front end of a rusted-out car. I handed her the case, which she gingerly took and held out. I swiped my implant, the same implant that projected the map, before using my axe to tap out the muck from my boots.

"Huh... what the hell is this?" She asked, prompting me to look up at what she had pulled out of the small, briefcase-sized reward crate. "Looks kinda like a..."

As I looked, I saw she was holding a small metal rectangle, about two inches tall and an inch across. A single seam traveled around the entire side, and with a flick, Tessa opened it up, exposing the lighter's top.

"Damn, it is. It's an old lighter," She said, flicking it again before activating it.

Instead of a flame coming out from the nub, which is what I assumed Tessa expected, a small loop of free-floating blue and purple plasma, just over an inch tall, popped up. It did not make the usual screaming sound of tortured air that I had come to expect from electric lighters, staying almost completely silent, which meant that these were not the cheap lighters I was used to dealing with.

"What the hell kind of lighter is this?"

"An electric one," I responded, holding out my hand. "They last longer and are more durable. But this one is pretty high quality. They usually make a really annoying high-pitched sound..."

She put the lighter in my hand, and I examined it for a minute before bringing it closer to my implant, opening the short description I got with every reward. Unsurprisingly, it was, in fact, a lighter, with a silence feature built in.

"That loop of plasma will light just about anything if you get it close enough," I explained. "It will also burn through stuff too, so that can be useful as well. The description says it has five minutes of 'burn time' a day before it needs to recharge, which is bullshit. Lighter like these can go weeks without needing a recharge."

"Doesn't really matter. If it works as well as you say, five minutes is more than you could ever need in a day," She pointed out before flicking the lighter closed and putting it back into her pocket. "You ready to head back?"

"Yeah, I need a shower."

"You're telling me, you're not the one who has to smell you," She said, smirking as she started walking away.

We only made it a dozen feet or so before having to step over the larger corpse of the first mutant. It was lying in a pool of black blood, with its chest and back punctured three times by arrows and its side hacked open with my axe. Once we had gotten past that, Tessa reached into a seemingly random car to pull out my backpack and the two extra duffle bags I was responsible for before pulling out her backpack. Once we had everything on and strapped tight, we headed off again. It would likely take the rest of the day to get home, so we needed to hurry to make it back before the screamers came out.

## Chapter 2

We arrived home just as the screamers were starting to fly above the trees, just managing to climb into the broken-down armored personnel carrier before we could get spotted. Tessa was fine, of course, since her enhanced speed and endurance meant the last hour she spent jogging with nearly sixty pounds of loot was barely even a workout. Unfortunately for me, I was carrying closer to a hundred and fifty because of my strength enhancements, so the trip was just on the curtails of possible, and pushed me to my limit.

"So.... much.... for taking... a... shower," I panted out, having dropped my packs next to Tessa's bed before collapsing back in the center aisle of the makeshift home.

"Was wondering when you would realize that," Tessa said, barely even sweating. "Now turn on your drone so I can take care of this stuff."

I flipped her off as I slowly recovered, reaching down and pulling off the lighting drone, activating it before closing my eyes. My breathing eventually returned to normal over the next few minutes, my muscles now feeling the burn. When I had recovered enough, I sat back up, watching Tessa as she went through our loot.

This was the first time in a while we had even bothered to loot for food, supplies, or other goodies to trade with. Between the fact that Tessa no longer needed to worry about stocking up for winter, our ability to safely eat the meat of mutated animals, and that we had one metabolism serum each, our food situation was looking pretty much solved. Our biggest concern now was

getting as much portable food as possible, but even that was a low priority behind gathering as many enhancements and rewards as possible.

"So, where to next?" I asked, pulling off my jacket and activating my map. "You said we had, what, a bit over a week before we should leave?"

"Maybe two weeks," She corrected with a shrug, dragging over another pack to unload. "We could stretch for more time, but I would rather get there a few days early than a few days too late."

"Yeah, no thanks," I agreed, scrolling through the map, looking for potential targets.

At this point, we had really started to scrape the bottom of the barrel in terms of nearby reward crates. There were no more green crates in easy travel distance, at least none that I could see. I once again cursed the fact that a significant portion of the blues and greens were hidden until we got close to them.

"We are running out of nearby stuff," I said with a frown, zooming out the map. "I think it's time to consider a new plan."

"We are *not* going into the city," Tessa said, stopping what she was doing to give me a glare. "Going into the city is way more dangerous than it's worth. Anyone who scavs there has a literal death wish."

"But-"

"I... I had a death wish, Leon," She added, cutting me off. "I didn't care anymore. But now there is a chance of getting the fuck out of this hell hole. We are not going into the city. It's a miracle either of us made it out alive. The hivers must have been distracted or something."

My partner returned to what she was doing, stacking a can of beans before moving on to the next duffel. When she opened it, she nodded and slid the whole bag under the small table we ate at. I knew it contained an entire package of water bottles, still wrapped in plastic.

"That water is for our trip," She explained. "I know we could survive drinking tainted water at this point, but I would rather not waste the calories we would spend doing so. This should be enough for the first quarter of the trip."

I nodded and looked back at the map, moving around its focus and frowning as I noticed something. I spent a minute considering it before getting Tessa's attention.

"Hey... come look at this and tell me what you see..."

It took a minute for her to realize what I was looking at. The most direct route to the golden dot, the target for our final challenge and where we would find our ticket off of this world, was multiple times further than our longest trip to date. Tessa was pretty familiar with the first sixth of the trip and was vaguely familiar with the following sixth. But we would be in entirely new territory once we were past that point.

At somewhere around the first third of the trip, well into the only vaguely familiar territory for Tessa, we passed within what looked like a day's travel of the only purple in which we knew what to expect, a visper nest. It was the gauge in which, prior to finding out that another purple reward crate was guarded by a pair of ursa, we had judged just how difficult purple crates would be. The fact that an Ursa was a massive bear mutant and vispers were forty-foot-long snakes, I don't think I would ever feel confident going after a purple cache with an unknown challenge.

What was interesting, though, was the blue and two green caches that we could hit on the way to the viper nest.

"Wait, are you suggesting we do something like this?" Tessa asked, trailing her finger along the path I envisioned. "That's nearly a day and a half travel to the blue, another day and a half to the green, a day to the next green, and, oh yeah, it ends with the fucking viper nest! Are you fucking insane?"

"Tessa. Ilbryen clearly said that getting to the golden marker would be more difficult than anything we had done before," I pointed out, shaking my head. "Not only do we need every single advantage we can get, but if we can't handle killing a couple of giant snakes, then what chance do we have of getting to the gold marker?"

She was quiet for a long moment, leaning next to me, just looking at the map. After a while, she sat down heavily at the end of her bed.

"This is insane, you know that right?" She asked, focusing on me. "Even if we get insanely lucky with the greens and blue, attacking a visper nest... There's going to be at least three of them, most likely more."

"We need to get stronger Tessa," I said with a shrug. "We need to push ourselves to get better gear."

"It will add an extra week of travel," She pointed out next, trying to convince me this was a bad idea. "We would have to leave within the next few days."

"I know. We have plenty of supplies, and we can always hunt mutants," I pointed out. "If we make good time, we can also find somewhere to hunker down for a few days, maybe find some moving water to clean off in."

She quietly chewed her lip, looking down at the map for a moment before groaning and flopping back down on her bed.

"Fine! We can try and clear out a visper nest," She said, frustration in her voice. "I think it's going to end up getting us killed, but alright, let's do it."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me, before making my way to the back of the APC, where the slanted back door offered reclined support for me to lean back on. I couldn't bring myself to celebrate the fact that I had convinced her to agree to my plan, as she wasn't entirely wrong.

It could definitely end up getting us killed.

Eventually, after about ten minutes of sitting in silence, I started pulling off my armor and equipment, the larger and more substantial things too big to sleep with. Tessa was also pulling off her jump boots, having already pulled off her muffle jacket. I quickly used a rag to dry up whatever sweat remained, cleaning myself off as well as I could with a damp cloth before laying out the repurposed couch cushions that made up my bed. A few shared words later, we were both asleep in the dark, my drone resting on the nearby table.

The following day was quiet, the coolness of the night and early morning quickly replaced by the warmer daytime temperatures. Tessa got up first, quickly using the makeshift shower system outside, before switching with me. When I was done, I quickly washed my pants and rinsed off my shield armor.

"So, what do we need to get done before we leave?" I asked when I was once again dressed, sitting on the top of the APC as Tessa did her own laundry.

"Well... honestly, there isn't much," She admitted, hanging up her last bit of laundry. "We have to leave within the next three or four days, which might not be enough time to get in contact with John."

"What? Why do you want to contact him?"

"Well, carrying cans of food around is going to suck," She pointed out. "Having some dried, smoked, or salted meat might come in handy. Also... I want to send a message back with him. For my dad."

I looked down, mentally kicking myself for forgetting about her father. After a few seconds, I looked back up to catch her looking out into the woods with a conflicted face.

"Why don't we go see him?" I said, the brown-haired survivor whipping her head around to look at me. "We bring a bunch of stuff to trade, take it to the outskirts, and I'll walk it in, trade for it, and then escort him to see you. You can say your goodbyes, and I'll bring him back."

"Wha... But... I..." She struggled for a minute before dropping down to sit on the edge of one of the APC's busted tires. "What would I even say to him?"

"You could try the truth?" I suggested, getting a harsh "Oh really?" look in return. "Well, what about most of the truth? I'm a traveler from a village far away from here who came here looking for something. Now that I found it, I'm heading home and inviting you to come with me. He knows about what the fucker did right? Spreading out those lies?"

"Yeah... took a while for me to convince him not to kill him," She admitted. "I... I don't know if I want to cause a scene. Because you showing up will, by the way, especially if John feels like being a prick. Which he will."

"It's up to you Tessa. As much as having some lighter food supplies might be good, I don't think it's essential," I pointed out. "On the other hand, this is pretty much the definition of a one-way trip. I'm not sure how you could convince anyone to let you come back here once we are gone."

"They wouldn't let me come visit for the holidays?" She asked with a smirk.

"I mean, I know nobles... other nobles I guess, they use the interreality stuff to go on adventures," I admitted, frowning as I thought. "But from what I understand, it's incredibly expensive. I'm banking on my siblings taking the money I'm earning through these trips and using it to make more money, securing the future of our noble status, but my brother is only eleven, and my sister is probably still catching up after being sick."

"I was joking," She responded, shaking her head. "I don't think I would ever come back here, even if I had a choice. This place is a hellhole, and once I'm out, I can't imagine ever coming back. Can you imagine coming to visit, like it was a vacation spot? Or coming to visit and getting stranded somehow?"

"I'd rather not imagine either of those things," I said, Tessa snorting and shaking her head.

"Alright, we can go to them," She said after a few moments of thinking. "Not like we will need any of this crap, we will either be dead or in your world. Try not to get completely swindled when you're bartering, please."

"Hey, I might not know much about skelly-wolves, displacers, or tuskers, but bartering is alive and well for lowies everywhere," I said, defending myself. "I'll be fine."

We chatted for a while as the sun moved across the sky, both of us wordlessly agreeing that we would be taking today easy, recovering and planning for the long challenge ahead. At one point, Tessa stopped and turned to me, a curious look on her face.

"You mentioned a while back that stuff from here might sell well when we got back... Should we try and bring stuff back with us?" Tessa asked. "Do the boxes have a weight limit?"

"I... have no idea," I admitted, scratching my head. "Depending on how popular the live show is, it might be cool to bring some stuff home... but honestly, I don't know if they have a weight limit... or if they are calibrated or something. I mean, they would have to be able to calibrate for weight change since they haven't weighed you."

"...Could you ask?" Tessa asked, sitting up and looking over at me. "They answered your question about the healing serums, right?"

"Cause I pointed out that watching us heal for a week straight if one of us got injured," I responded, eventually looking around. "Any chance we could get an answer?"

We sat there for a few minutes, waiting in silence. After a while, Tessa rolled her eyes and groaned, laying back down. I chuckled, doing the same. About an hour later, while I was drifting off, a ping echoed through the small clearing that surrounded the APC. I sat up quickly, as did Tessa, both of us reaching for our weapons. My fingers were touching my axe, while Tessa had her pistol out already when I realized the sound had come from my implant. I quickly activated it to find that the map had been replaced by a message.

"Ten pounds each, bring me back something for my desk," I read out loud, before looking up at Tessa.

For a long moment, we just stared at each other before I lost my poker face and started laughing, my partner quickly joining in.

## Chapter 3

The day ended without us getting much done, which, as far as I was concerned, was fine. We had been working pretty much non-stop since Ilbryen made Tessa his offer, and we had more than earned a break. Add that to the fact that we had just set a dangerously high bar for ourselves?

I was perfectly happy to take a day off.

Despite that, however, we still needed to get things done. So, after waking up the next morning, we quickly got to work getting everything set for our trip. The first step was some gear maintenance. I sharpened all of our knives and my axe, while Tessa fixed any holes or tears in

our clothes, which at this point was almost all stuff from reward crates, so there were very few holes.

When our gear was all set, we both began packing up, both for trading and for our long journey to getting out of this reality. All told, the trip would likely take a little over two weeks, at minimum. It would take much longer if we got lucky and stumbled upon more green and blue reward caches, which I sincerely hoped we would. We were just at the cusp of one month remaining for us to reach the golden point on the map, which meant we had two extra weeks to play around with.

We also weren't entirely sure how this new challenge would work, which made Tessa and I very nervous. We knew we had a time limit because sometime after Tessa accepted the offer, a small timer appeared in the corner of the map, counting down the days and hours until our time was up. We knew that Ilbryen and his company would be throwing additional threats to make the journey even harder. But beyond being comparable, and maybe even worse than a purple crate, we had nothing to measure how difficult they would be.

When we were done packing everything worth trading and everything we wanted to bring back with us, we sat back and examined our work. We had four duffel bags stuffed to the brim with stuff to trade, including useful stuff that would ordinarily be worth keeping but would just sit in the APC and rot now that we were leaving for good. While the duffel bags were in danger of bursting seams if we dropped them, our backpacks were just around half empty. A few cans of food, some basic tools and supplies, as well as five bottles of water each. We were hoping to fill the empty space with more dried food, which we would stretch as long as possible by hunting and gathering as we traveled.

By the time everything was all set, it was way too late to be heading out into the wilds, even if Tessa was extremely familiar with the area between the APC and her old village. Not only was it dangerous, but there wasn't much point because no one would be willing to trade with us if we arrived when it was getting dark. We both spent the rest of the day mentally preparing and eating a lot of the food we would have been forced to leave behind.

When the next day finally rolled around, we set out customarily early. Unsurprisingly, we both had trouble sleeping, so when the sun started to rise, and Tessa was sure it would be safe to travel, we were both more than eager to get moving.

Progress was slower than we were used to, as Tessa was carrying two duffel bags, and without strength enhancements, she was understandably taking it slowly. Still, the settlement was relatively close, and we managed to avoid any issues along the way. As we traveled, Tessa was coaching me on what to do and what not to say.

"Don't mention me or my dad until after you've made the trade," She said. "I don't think it would stop most people from taking anything, especially considering all of the food is in cans or sealed up, but it's not worth the risk."



"How do I... what's your dad's name?" I asked as I followed behind Tessa.

"Howard," She answered, "Howard Morse."

"Huh... You know, I don't think you ever told me your last name..." I pointed out.

"And you never told me yours," She fired back, looking over her shoulder with a smirk.

"Draver," I answered easily. "Leon Draver."

After about four hours of walking, Tessa eventually stopped by a car wreck by the side of a road. It had been stripped of anything even remotely useful and plenty that probably wasn't. Between several well-beaten paths, obviously looted buildings, and even the occasional campsite, it was pretty clear that we were close to an active settlement.

"Alright, this is about as far as I can go," She said, frowning as she put her bags down. "Any closer, and we risk running into a patrol or something. Just follow this road, and you'll see it in about twenty minutes."

"Would a patrol really recognize you?" I asked, putting down my own bags to rest for a moment. "It's been a few years, right?"

"Leon, I killed the mayor's son," She said, running her finger through her hair. "The fucker had it coming, but I wouldn't be surprised if my face was still plastered on a board somewhere, with instructions to kill on sight for a big reward."

"Fucking hell... Well, stay safe," I said, pulling off my pack and carefully handing it to Tessa, as my axe was clipped to one side. "I'll be back soon."

It took a few minutes for me to get a good grip on all four bags at once, but after a few tries and Tessa's help, I was off. I took it slow, both to save my energy in case something happened and because I didn't want to cause any panic if I bumped into someone. About ten minutes after I left Tessa by herself, I could smell just the faintest hint of smoke. A few minutes after that, I finally saw the village.

This wasn't the first time I had seen it, of course, but it was the first time I had seen it up close. The walls were more impressive now that I was standing in front of them, built out of old cars stacked like bricks. Telephone poles, no doubt cut down from around the area, helped to reinforce the protective structure. Already, I could tell the wall encircled a decent-sized space, connecting to two larger buildings.

The closest of the large buildings, while nowhere near as severe or twisted, showed similar modifications to what the savages did to their buildings. A few spots had walls that were

knocked out, and a small structure had been built on top of it. All of the windows facing the outside of the perimeter wall were heavily reinforced with car parts and wood.

As I got closer, I slowed down even more. Eventually, someone spotted me; an older man of maybe forty caught me out of the corner of his eye. He did a double-take before turning to get the attention of another person close by. Before I had made it another thirty feet, the entire town was buzzing with activity. Most people rushed inside the rusted scrap walls for protection, while a few, most of them armed in some way, stayed behind. A few people popped up around the wall as well, most of them wearing armor of some kind, all of them holding some sort of makeshift weapon, probably muskets.

"Hello!" I called out, slowing down to a stop, still a fair distance away from those who stayed behind. "My name is Leon. I've got some stuff to trade, and I was wondering if anyone was interested?"

One of the largest men to stay outside turned to whisper something to the man next to him. After a moment, he responded.

"Alright, but you'll have to stay outside the walls," He explained, gesturing to come closer.

Keenly aware that I was outnumbered and under the watchful gaze of an armed militia, I slowly made my way to the small group, stopping when I was a few feet away.

"Thank you. I have a long trip ahead of me and I was hoping to trade all of this for some lighter travel food," As I explained, I put the duffle bags down and kneeled, opening one of them to show it was full of cans of food. "There's some clothes and other stuff I scavenged as well, but I figure people will mostly be interested in the food."

"Can we take a look at it?" He asked, looking down at the now-open bag. "I'm not causing a stir for cans of bad food."

"Yeah, be my guest," I said, standing back up and taking a step back, not wanting to loom over anyone.

The big man nodded to one of his friends, who crossed the distance warily. He quickly went through some of the cans in one bag, before looking up at me and gesturing to the others. When I nodded, he started going through the second bag, which was when the big guy spoke up again.

"What brings you around here?" He asked. "You don't strike me as a local."

"I'm a traveler of sorts," I explained. "Exploring old towns, scavenging and looting. I keep the good stuff and sell the rest before moving on."

Before he could respond, the smaller guy going through the duffle bags stood up and nodded back to who I could only assume was his boss or superior. I was pretty sure he wasn't the mayor because he didn't look anything like what Tessa had described.

"Well, Andy seems to think your stuff is worth trading for. You said you're looking for travel food? Anything in particular?"

"Anything that will last in a backpack for a couple of weeks," I explained with a shrug. "Hard to guess what you've got."

The man nodded in understanding before sending another person inside the walls, presumably to get people to trade with. He looked back at me, eyes trailing over my armor, which I internally kicked myself for still wearing. The obviously high-tech armor stood out like a sore thumb.

"Where are you headed?" He asked after a moment. "Any particular destination in mind?"

"No destination, but I plan on going west," I answered, which was most definitely not the direction we would be going in.

We made small talk for about fifteen minutes before people started to leave the walled area of the village. Some of them were just getting back to whatever they were doing, but some people were carrying things to trade. Our conversation was soon put on hold as I bartered with a dozen or so people, though honestly, I wasn't working that hard to get crazy deals. We had brought a ridiculous amount of stuff, enough that at fair trade, I would be leaving with way more than we could carry comfortably for the long trip.

After about an hour of haggling with people, I had one empty duffle bag and one full of relatively stable food, including something called fruit leather made from berries, dried and smoked meat, some pemmican, which Barry, the large man who seemed to be in charge assured me would last for *years* if I kept it stored properly. When I had traded, bartered, and occasionally given away everything I had brought, I pushed the spare duffel into the one full of food and zipped it shut before standing upright.

"Right, this should be more than enough," I said with a smile, before scratching the back of my head. "Now, could you do me a favor? I'd like to talk to Howard Morse. Do you think someone could fetch him?"

"...What do you want with old man Morse?" He asked, an underlying tension suddenly coming to the surface.

"Well... when I was passing through, I stumbled on his daughter, Tessa," I explained honestly. "She very kindly put me up in her home and showed me the dangers of the area. But now I'm moving on, so I suggested she come with me."

"And she agreed?" He asked, sounding skeptical.

"Wouldn't you?" I asked. "Exiled from her home, and banned from every village within a reasonable walking distance, all for defending herself?"

I shook my head, before taking a minute to gather myself. I needed these people to get Tessa's dad for me, preferably without me doing anything serious.

"Defending herself? Is that what she told you?" One of the people behind Barry said, sneering at me. "She's a killer, dangerous! She led poor Adam along and-"

"That's enough," Barry said, cutting the other man off. "Go get old man Morse."

"Wh- Why? Fuck that bitch, she-"

"Go get him, now," He repeated, turning to give the smaller man a harsh glare. "Tessa Morse may be exiled, but her father is free to come and go as he pleases, as is he."

He finished by pointing at me. After a moment of glaring, the short man looked away and nodded, quickly turning and heading back inside, hopefully, off to do as he was told. After he had disappeared behind the walls, Barry looked back at me.

"Three years later, she remains a tense subject," He explained, shaking his head. "Mayor Wallace likes to remind us frequently of what she did. But some of us still remember what his son was like."

For a moment, I considered what I would say, part of me wanting to call him out for not helping her in the first place. Eventually, I just shrugged, not really caring about him or anyone here beyond this moment. After a few minutes of awkward silence, an older man stepped out of the gate, leaning heavily on a cane. He looked around before spotting us, quickly hobbling to us as fast as he could.

"So, I hear you're traveling with my daughter?" He asked when he got to us.

"That's right," I responded simply. "She shouldn't be out here alone, and I could use the company as well."

He gave me a long look, still leaning on his cane. I could feel his eyes stopping on my armor, widening just a hair at the glowing highlights. After a long pause, he nodded and walked closer, passing right by me and heading out the way I came.

"Well, let's go then," He said impatiently as if I was holding him back. "That coward Sam was running right to the mayor's house last I saw him. I'd rather not be here when that fucker comes running."

I turned to look at the old man, then back to Barry, who was laughing to himself. I shook my head and lifted the duffel full of food before chasing after him.

## Chapter 4

I easily caught up with the older man, who was actually setting a halfway decent pace, even with his limping and age. For a while, we were silent, which gave me the chance to really take a look at him. He had brown hair with streaks of gray mixed in. He was taller than me by a few inches but more wiry, built for speed rather than power. Even though he hadn't been out hunting or anything, according to Tessa, he still looked to be in good shape. The family resemblance was clear, save for his eyes, which were much lighter than Tessa's.

"Sam said you were 'taking my daughter away.'" He said suddenly, without looking in my direction. "I assume that was him being an idiot, and her leaving was her choice?"

"Uh, yeah, I wouldn't force her," I assured him before chuckling. "Not sure I could, to be honest. Pretty sure she would kick my ass."

The older man simply nodded, clearly agreeing with my statement. He kept walking, looking around with trained precision, like he had made this journey hundreds of times before, which, considering what Tessa had told me about him, was probably true. Despite the reasonable pace for someone with a pronounced limp, we were still going slow compared to the pace I had set for the village. As a result, it took just about fifteen extra minutes to get back to the spot where I left Tessa. I only realized it a second before Tessa stepped out of the woods, carrying both our packs.

"Good to see you, Dad," She said with a smile as she made her way to us, putting the bags down by the burnt-out wreck we had stopped at originally.

"It's good to see you too buttercup," The older man said, both of them meeting in a tight hug. "You are looking better, better than before winter."

Tessa rolled her eyes; I assumed at the nickname, giving me a harsh look that promised grievous payback if I ever repeated it. I couldn't help but smirk and shrug.

"I've been doing better," Tessa responds, the two family members pulling back slightly. "The last few months have been... interesting. Challenging for sure, but... much better than before."

"Good. I was worried when I left you before winter," He admitted, stepping back to lean on the wrecked car. "You had that look in your eye. I was worried you wouldn't make it through."

"I... managed to survive winter without going crazy," She said with a deceptively calm shrug. "I gathered all the books and magazines I could, like you suggested. It helped. But it was a close thing when spring came... Honestly, I was getting reckless, but Leon saved me from doing even more stupid shit."

The older man looked over at me when his daughter pointed me out, his searching look harsh and steely. When he focused back on Tessa, he gave her an understanding smile and patted her shoulder.

"I'm sure you would have been fine, but I'm glad you're doing better."

"Why don't we find somewhere to sit?" I suggested before they could continue talking. "Maybe somewhere out of sight?"

Both of them looked at me, Howard with a frown and Tessa with a smile and nod.

"Good idea, there's an old house this way," My partner said. "It's been completely cleared, but it looked relatively intact."

"Fine, though there isn't much to be worried about," Howards agreed with a shrug. "They do more patrols than ever these days."

"That's what I'm worried about."

"I think that's the problem."

Tessa and I said simultaneously, both of us sharing a look before leaning over and grabbing my backpack, Tessa doing the same. We spent about ten minutes walking down an overgrown but still identifiable street before finally getting to a row of houses. Tessa confidently walked up to the front door and stepped inside, her father following after her. I gave another quick look around before stepping in as well, shutting the door behind us.

Tessa and I looked around for a minute or two, just to make sure there weren't any surprises waiting for us, before we met again in the living room. Howard was already sitting down on the ratty old couch, Tessa quickly joining him, leaving me to sit in a single seat that at one point probably matched the rest of the room, but was now stained black with water damage and rot.

"You're leaving?" Howard asked bluntly, leaving no chance for Tessa to breach the subject slowly.

"I am," she responded, just as bluntly. "Being alone out here is driving me insane, Dad. When Leon offered to go with him... I couldn't say no."

"I understand that, and I don't blame you for wanting to leave," Howard admitted. "I... Should have told you to go, to try and find somewhere that the bastard's lies hadn't reached. I guess I was just being selfish."

"I wasn't ever going to leave without someone pushing me," Tessa explained, turning to look at me. "Part of me had already given up. I would have never left the APC by myself."

"And where exactly is your destination?" He asked, following his daughter's gaze to me. "The coward Sam said you were a 'Traveler.' What exactly does that mean?"

"That was just crap to keep them from following us or whatever," I explained. "I had no reason to tell anyone in that town the truth except you."

"We are going to Leon's home," Tessa explained, putting her hand on her dad's leg. "He... lives very far away, far enough that the trip is essentially one way."

"I'm glad that you have an actual destination," He responded with a nod. "traveling anywhere far is dangerous these days. Being a 'traveler' sounds like a death sentence. What's your home like?"

"It's... well, it's a hell of a lot less dangerous than this place, at least in the day-to-day," I explained.

"And both of us would be in high regard once we made it," Tessa explained. "Leon was sent with a specific task, and if we make it back we will be a lot better off than even the Mayor ever was."

"Good lord Tessa, will you stop beating around the bush?" Howard demanded, frustration starting to leak into his demeanor. "I understand why you want to go, and I am happy that you will live better, but I can tell you are hiding something. I mean, look at him. It looks like he is wearing something out of an old comic book."

Tessa let out a sigh, shaking her head and taking a deep breath.

"Leon's home is years ahead of us, further than we were before the Collapse," She explained. "He was sent here as a test of sorts, to survive and to gather bits of advanced

technology to bring back. The people that gave him the test agreed that if I can join him on his journey home and we both survive, they would give me the same status they are giving him."

Howard looked at her for a moment before turning to look back at me. His eyes trailed down to my armor, then to my armored gloves. He frowned and turned back to Tessa, who seemed to anticipate his disbelief, had already pulled out her safety knife. She activated it and swung at a nearby lamp, slicing it in half easily, rivulets of red hot metal spattering on the damp carpet. She then moved to drag it across her cheek, which, of course, would do nothing. Howard, not knowing that the knife wouldn't cut her at all, lunged forward to grab the knife, managing to wrap his hand around the blade and pull it away from her face. He winced as if expecting pain, only for his expression to shift to surprise when the knife did nothing to him.

"It's a safety knife," I explained. "Cuts more or less anything that's not alive. And this is our map."

I rolled up my sleeve and tapped my arm, activating the holo-projected map that both Tessa and I had come to rely so much on. When Howard turned to say something, he spotted the glowing projection, his eyes going wide.

"What the hell?"

The older man stood as quickly as his bum leg would let him, taking a step closer and waving his hand through the projection, which shifted and broke up as his hand interrupted the projected light. After a minute of messing with the projection he turned to look at his daughter.

"That interesting, sure, but-"

"Whack him with your cane," She suggested. "Just don't break it, you need it to get home."

With very little hesitation the older man choked up on his cane and slapped it across my arm. For a split second, a red bubble of energy popped into existence around my arm, completely opaque, where his cane smacked against me, fading out to translucent and then completely transparent the further away it got. His cane rebounded from the impact, making the older man stumble back onto the couch. He stared at both of us for a long moment before eventually recovering enough to talk.

"Well... alright then. Advanced, huh?" He asked, Tessa nodding in confirmation. "Well... Alright. And you trust him?"

"We've been working together for almost two months," She said. "He shared everything he could, and we have both gotten pretty strong because of it. Yeah, I trust him."



"Good, that's good, Tessa. I'm glad you are getting the chance to find someplace where you can be happy and that you'll be safe. You will be safe, right?"

"I'll do my best to stay safe, Dad, but you know as well as I do that there are no guarantees."

"Yeah, you get that from me. The idea of playing it safe just sounds boring to the Morse family. Your grandma and grandpa were the same way."

The two of them spent an hour or so talking, seeming to stay away from difficult subjects on some unspoken agreement. Eventually, I started sorting through the new bag of food I brought back with me, splitting it up into our backpacks. I made sure I was carrying the heaviest stuff since being the heavy was my job at this point. When I was done I handed both of them some jerky, already chipping on my own piece.

"Isn't this for your trip?" He asked, watching as Tessa and I took another big bite.

"It is, but we already have enough," Tessa accrued him. "It's one way, don't forget, and we will be scavenging while we travel... probably. Speaking of which, are you familiar with this area?"

Tessa stood up from her spot, picked up my hand, and started controlling the map until it was displaying the area. Once she was set, she gestured for her dad to get closer.

"Well, it's one heck of a hike," He said, eyes following along the general path between the golden point and where we currently were. "You would get there eventually, but be careful, we know there is at least one savager camp in the area."

"We know, we already ran into them," I explained without thinking, Tessa wincing as I did. "Only about three of them survived, we think."

Howard once again stood up out of his seat, this time looking angry, turning to his daughter with a harsh look. Tessa groaned before starting to explain what had happened while I added my own details here or there. By the end of it, Howard was upset but sitting down again.

"That could have very easily gone wrong for you two, you realize that?" He asked, shaking his head. "You're both lucky to be alive. If they had decided to chase you down anymore, you would be carrion food."

"We know dad," Tessa assured him. "But Leon was right, it needed to be done. Every piece of tech we have is going to make this journey easier."

The conversation eventually spun around to how Howard was doing. The older man wasn't quite comfortable talking about himself, mostly because he was clearly annoyed with how little he could contribute in his older age and persistent injury. He did seem to understand that this would be the last conversation they would have, so he pushed through his dislike and talked as much as he could. Eventually, after two or three hours, he stood up from the couch.

"I think it's time I get back," He said, a frown on his face., "Frankly, it's a miracle that they haven't started hunting us down. I can't imagine what kind of shitstorm getting back is going to be like."

Tessa nodded and stood as well, both of them sharing another tight hug, this one even longer than their first. They whispered a few things to each other, and I pretended to be very interested in what was going on outside, not wanting it to seem like I was listening in. After a ten-minute goodbye, in which both of them pretended not to be crying, Howard and I started making the trip back to the village.

The trip was completely silent, following along the same path as before, a beat-up road with a wide beaten path through it. When we were about five minutes away from the village Howard stopped and turned to me.

"I think this is far enough. I wasn't joking about there being a shit show waiting for us when we got back," He said, facing away from me. "I can make the last few minutes by myself, and it will keep you from getting sucked into anything."

I opened my mouth to tell him it was fine, but he turned and focused on me completely, his eyes holding a seriousness that made me instinctively step back.

"This world is terrible. It chews people up and spits them out, broken and twisted. If you can offer my baby girl something better, then all the power to you," He said, his grip on his cane audibly tightening. "I know survival is never guaranteed. But if my baby girl dies you had better be a cooling corpse already, because in this world or the next I will make you regret otherwise."

Without another word the grizzled old man turned and hobbled away, leaving me alone on the beaten path, too shocked to do anything but watch him go.

## Chapter 5

When I eventually recovered from Howard's threatening exit, I quickly made my way back to Tessa. It had been weird talking to someone other than her after almost two months of basically no other human contact, and it left me missing my family even more than I usually did. I couldn't wait to get home, to see what my siblings had been up to and hear how they had been

enjoying their new status. My brother would have definitely started his new lessons, and my sister would be walking around on her own by now, fully recovered from exotic energy poisoning that she had been suffering from for years.

It even made me want to seek out my other sister, Amanda. She had been missing for years now, and now that I was a noble, I actually stood a chance of finding her. Assuming she was still alive.

When I finally stepped back into the house, Tessa was waiting for me. I had barely made it past the doorway when she quickly wrapped me in a hug.

"Thank you," She said, her head on my shoulder. "For helping with that. For pushing me to do it. Just sending him a message... that would have been terrible."

"Yeah, of course Tessa, I'm just glad you agreed," I responded, rubbing her back.

After a moment, she pulled away, focusing on me with a searching look. Whatever she was looking for, she must have found it because she squeezed my arm and looked concerned.

"What's wrong?" She asked. "They didn't give you any trouble, did they?"

"No, no its fine. I... seeing you and your dad just made me think of my family," I explained, rubbing the back of my neck. "I miss them."

"You're going to see them again, I promise," She responded, giving me a reassuring smile. "Just a few more weeks you'll be hugging them instead."

"Yeah, Yeah, I know," I agreed, nodding my head before smirking at her. "I'm looking forward to introducing you to them."

"Introducing... really?" She asked, suddenly nervous. "But.. I mean ..."

"Yeah, our new place has plenty of room for you, and it will be better for you to stay close until you get used to everything," I pointed out. "I can already imagine how badly my mom wants to meet the person who kept me alive long enough to make it back. Assuming she's been watching."

She chuckled nervously, her eyes widening slightly before she quickly grabbed my backpack and passed it to me.

"Come on, we have the rest of the day to travel," She pointed out, very clearly changing the subject. "We should really get going."

I couldn't help but laugh, nodding to her sudden desire to rush, following her out of the house as she fiddled with her backpack. A quick check of the map later and we were off, heading southeast, away from the village and very much not west like I had told Barry. We quickly settled into our usual routine for traveling, with Tessa focused on where we were going, stopping occasionally to check things out with her binocular glasses. While she kept an eye on where we were going, I focused on what was around us, making sure we weren't ambushed by anything. It was a strategy we had adopted soon after securing the first purple crate, and it let us put our complete attention on different tasks rather than forcing Tessa to do both, as I followed along like an idiot.

The first half-hour of travel was boring, mostly because we were still in the heavily patrolled area around the village and inside the quiet perimeter around the hiver city. With little to worry about and nothing worthwhile to loot, we made pretty good time, only slowing down to a more cautious speed when Tessa pointed out a tree that was marked. A green circle with a brown rectangular shape was painted around the tree in several places, with dripping drops of paint along some of it.

"This was set up by the village hunters and scavengers," She explained, hand tracing the old, partially worn marking. "I used to help redo them every once in a while when I patrolled the perimeter. It's kind of like the village flag, marking out where was safe and when you were getting close to a village."

"What's it supposed to be?" I asked, tilting my head as I tried to interpret the symbol.

"It was supposed to be a loaf of bread in a green circle," She explained, shaking her head and chuckling. "But that was too hard for most of the hunters and scavengers, so it sort of devolved from there."

She stared at the symbol for a few moments longer, her fingers tracing it before she pulled away and stepped back. Then she turned and gestured with her head back to the vague path we had been following.

"Come on, let's get going," She said, focusing on the path ahead. "We have to start really paying attention now. We are at the very outskirts of the quiet area around the city, and this marks the end of the patrolled area around the village."

"We are on our own then," I said while looking around, the dense trees around us suddenly feeling much more foreboding.

"Yup, nothing we can't handle, though," Tessa pointed out, nudging me a bit before walking ahead. "C'mon, we need to start moving. Keep your eyes out for a good place to stay for the night."

I nodded and quickly caught up to her, keeping my head on a swivel as we walked. The path slowly faded until we were walking through waist-high grass and weeds, all of them growing through the thousands of cracks in the asphalt under our feet. It wasn't anything we were not used to at this point, but it was still annoying. Thankfully, I spotted that the sidewalks of the road we were traveling on were in a bit better condition, so we moved over to the side of the road, allowing us to speed up.

Eventually, we passed through whatever mutated plant had been growing *through* the asphalt, and we could resume our normal pace, making good progress until the sun started to set worryingly low, prompting us to pick a house with a nice, solid basement and quickly setting up a secure place to sleep for the night. After pushing around some furniture to block most of the doors and locking the one we left clear, we settled down for a simple meal of dried meats and fruit leather, which I had never had before but was actually really good. It lacked the sharp sweetness of artificial sugar I was used to, both from home and from the canned fruit we occasionally ate, but it was still really good. Maybe even better.

"What is this anyway?" I asked, tearing off a chunk and chewing it.

"Fruit leather? It's basically a finely ground mash of fruits and some veggies that you dehydrate," She explained, grabbing a bit for herself. "Usually, they use whatever berries they can find or that are left over. I think this is raspberry and... strawberry, maybe? Definitely some sort of veggie, too. Either way, it's nice and lasts for a while."

"How did you dehydrate it?" I asked skeptically, swallowing my last chunk before resealing the tightly wrapped package to keep me from eating anymore.

"You can make one using a fire or one that uses warmed rocks," She assured me. "Just takes a long time."

When we were finished eating, we both moved closer together, and I pulled up my map to see what kind of progress we had made despite spending most of the day walking in the wrong direction, towards the village.

"Alright, I think we just managed to make enough progress that we can get to the first cache in two days," She said, pointing out the vague path to our first target. "We might have to save it for early on the third day, though, if we stumble on another cache or something."

"We have plenty of time," I pointed out. "I would rather just put it on the third day so we don't burn ourselves out."

Tessa gestured with her hands as if she was weighing the options before finally shrugging.

"On one hand we have a deadline we *need* to hit, which makes me think that just taking our time is not a good idea," She said, chewing on her lip. "On the other hand..."

"Rushing is how we end up dead," I finished, the brunette survivor nodding in agreement. "I think rushing it in at night is a bad idea; if we get stuck or it takes too long, we are screwed. Let's just plan on doing it early on the third day but also stay aware of the fact that wasting time isn't going to do us any favors."

Tessa considered my words for a moment before finally nodding in agreement.

"Yeah, alright," She said. "You're right. There isn't much difference, especially when we are likely a week or more ahead of schedule despite the detour we are taking."

We discussed our plans past the first green cache, but quickly realized that there wasn't much point trying to puzzle out how much time each leg of the trip would take, and exactly how much time each crate would be if we couldn't even figure out what our time schedule would be for the first one. We eventually just gave up, planning the trip in only the broadest of terms, which at this point was more of a review than planning.

"Should we even bother scavenging for anything until our packs get lighter?" I asked after we had finished our "planning" session. "We have plenty of food for now, right?"

"Well, what about the ten pounds we can bring to your world?" She asked, looking over her shoulder and setting up a makeshift bed from some relatively intact couch cushions.

"Damn, forgot about that..." I admitted, looking up at the finished basement ceiling as I thought. "What do you think?"

"Well... it depends on what you want to bring back," She pointed out. "For something like jewelry, all we need is to look out for big, fancy houses. But for something like books or random stuff? We would kinda just have to loot houses until we find something we like."

"A pile of jewelry isn't going to weigh much... right?" I asked, looking over at her. "Maybe we both bring like a pound or two of jewelry and then keep our eyes open?"

"Solid, but we should definitely wait until we are closer to start," She suggested, laying down on her bed. "We will hopefully have a better idea of how much time we have left and how much we can spend fucking around, scavenging for knick nacks."

As Tessa got some sleep, I got first watch. I ended up spending most of the time reading with the help of my drone, which I kept at near-minimum levels to stretch out its charge. It was better than nothing, but there was only so much reading magazines I could do before I started to get antsy. I made a mental note to grab a book that was actually interesting next time we were looting. I passed out almost immediately when Tessa and I traded places.

I woke up the following day, just five hours later, to Tessa preparing breakfast, which at this point just meant unwrapping some tightly sealed bags of salted meat. We also had some soda that Tessa had snagged from the kitchen upstairs, which was great because it contained plenty of caffeine, which we both desperately needed in the morning. It was a bit early to be drinking sugary drinks, but my mom wasn't around me to shame me for it.

By the time we were packed up and ready to go, the sun was just rising, and the morning safe period was just starting. After a quick check of the map, we were on our way, with two days of solid travel ahead of us. I was hoping we would stumble on a green or blue cache on the way to the first stopping point, but there was no way to know if we would.

We managed to avoid any issues for the entire first day, making significant progress towards our destination, even spending an hour or so searching through a large, fancy-looking house that we stumbled upon early in the afternoon. We grabbed a few expensive-looking pieces of jewelry from two of the rooms and shared a good laugh when we realized that neither of us had any idea of what expensive jewelry actually looked like.

"I think... I think you can test if a diamond isn't actually glass by trying to scratch it with a piece of metal," I said, squinting as I tried to remember an off-handed comment that my once business partner Steve told me. "A diamond won't get scratched unless you have another diamond? Maybe?"

"I have no fucking idea Leon, do I look like I wear jewelry?" She asked, throwing a gold ring at me, the small piece bouncing off my chest. "These could all be glass, for all I know."

"Well... let's just grab a bunch from a few different places, I guess, and hope it's worth something when we get back."

We quickly grabbed a bunch and stored it in our backpacks, wrapping it in a towel to keep them safe. When we were done we headed off again, barely slowing down to check the kitchen for anything easy, finding nothing that wasn't long since rotten and turned to dust.

## Chapter 6

We passed by two white crates on the first day of our journey, and it was really tempting to stop. One of them was even visible from the cracked and overgrown road that we were following, hanging on an old telephone pole.

"It's not worth the time Leon, c'mon," Tessa said, grabbing my arm and pulling me away. "It isn't going to have anything useful for us anyway."

I reluctantly followed behind her, focusing on the mostly destroyed road ahead of us. A few minutes passed with Tessa easily guiding us through another section of ruined town. We were still firmly in an area that Tessa knew well, meaning we were making good time. We even managed to avoid running into a pack of skelly-wolves, though only barely.

We spent the first night sleeping in the second story of a home, having spent an hour jamming furniture into the only stairs up. There were three bedrooms, but unfortunately, two of the beds were rotted and moldy. Luckily, the third was in pretty good shape, save for a thick covering of dust, which we cleaned by slowly peeling off the top blanket and laying it on the ground. After a dinner of jerky, soda, and two cans of food we found in the kitchen, Tessa took first watch while I slept.

The following morning, after I woke up Tessa and we both ate breakfast, we immediately headed off again, only to stop only five or six hundred feet from the house when I checked the map.

"Hold up," I said, getting Tessa's attention. "There is a green... that way."

As I looked at my map, I turned until I was facing the right way. When I was certain I had the angle correct, I took a step toward it and pointed.

"That way, just inside the detectable range," I continued. "Inside... a garage of somewort? Maybe a warehouse?"

Both of us looked up from the map and looked where I had been pointing. Directly in front of us were two buildings, overgrown husks of some sort. Behind that was a wall, and even further behind that, just visible from our angle, was a larger building with a gently sloped metal roof that actually looked relatively intact.

"Any ideas?" I asked, both of us walking to get around the two buildings. "You know this area, right?"

"I... think that's an old construction equipment warehouse," She answered after a pause. "I remember going in there when I was first starting out."

"Right, so it's been looted."

"Yeah, probably. I think we got a lot of metal and tools out of it," She responded. "C'mon, let's find out how this one is going to try and kill us."

We made our way to the large, warehouse-like structure, walking another sixty to seventy feet down our current road before making a right down a similar overgrown asphalt path. As we got closer, I could see that while the majority of the structure was a huge



warehouse, there was also a front building, as well as a half dozen auxiliary buildings spread across the large, fenced-in space.

After a few minutes of just watching the warehouse, Tessa got bored of waiting and started heading to the front entrance, which was a normal-sized addition to the warehouse. I quickly caught up with her and grabbed her arm.

"I go in first, remember?" I said, tapping the metal plating of my armor.

"Fine, yeah, let's go," She said with a frustrated sigh, nodding towards the doorway into the building.

After a quick look around, I stepped through the overgrown bush that blocked the doorway, opening the still-intact front door. A soft, hollow sound went off as I stepped inside, like a broken and muffled bell. I froze, waiting for something to happen. Tessa just pushed me further inside.

"It's something stores have, to let people know someone is here," She explained, pointing up at the door jam, where a small bell hung down, rusted and broken.

"Oh, some stores have motion sensors at home."

"We have that here, too. Now let's go."

We made our way into the structure, which was empty save a few chairs along one wall and a large service desk on the other side. I could imagine someone sitting on the other side, typing away at the now soggy and stained computer. A quick check to my map confirmed the green crate was further in the building, well inside the main warehouse, almost in the direct center.

I guided us both around the front desk to a door on the other side, putting my hand on the door handle. With a quick look back at Tessa to confirm she was ready, I turned the knob and slowly opened the door...

Only to quickly close it again, taking a step back, pulling Tessa with me.

"What was that?" I asked, focused on the door.

"I don't know, I didn't get to see it. You closed the door too quickly," She answered, her eye roll so strong I could sense it without looking. "What did it look like?"

"Like aggressive darkness," I said with a frown. "The light from the door only went a few feet into the room before dropping off. It was like utter pitch black past that."

"That... I have no idea what that... What?" She asked, looking at me in confusion. "That doesn't make any sense. Out of the way, let me take a-"

Her request was interrupted by a quiet ding from my arm, my map implant flickering on without my input.

"I said we would challenge you," I said, reading the projected text out loud. "It's Ilbryen and his people. This is them making things more difficult for us."

"But that was supposed to be on the journey there," Tessa pointed out. "We aren't on that path yet."

"They never said we had to take a specific path. They must have moved this in when we talked about going this way," I said, stepping back to the door and slowly opening it.

Tessa looked over my shoulder and we both stared into the darkness. Just as I had said, the light from the door only went a few feet into the large warehouse-like structure before being swallowed up by the oppressive, almost aggressive darkness. Slowly, I closed the door again, both of us moving away from it.

"Okay... so that's mildly terrifying," Tessa admitted. "But it's a green... so it can't be that bad."

"My first green was underground in a nest of hivers," I reminded her. "They can be bad."

"...Okay, that's fair," She responded. "Do you think your drone would help?"

"At full power maybe. But it would only last for ten or fifteen minutes like that. Plus... I have a feeling that isn't all that's in there. Darkness is worrying but not dangerous. All the greens we have seen so far have had some dangerous elements to it."

"Also fair...But what else are we going to do? We have to go in there eventually," She pointed out. "Why don't we send the drone in with orders to fly in and come back while we stay out here?"

"I... feel like bringing in light is exactly what they would expect," I responded after a moment. "I mean, it wouldn't be much of a challenge if all we had to do was bring an extra strong flashlight."

We debated for a few more minutes before she finally convinced me to send in the drone. After a series of commands, I opened the door once more and released the drone, which, per its instructions, floated about five feet into the room and slowly began raising its light levels, directed in a wide cone in front of itself. After a few seconds, I could hear the drone releasing a slight hum, a concerning noise considering that up to this point it had always been

completely silent. Even with how hard it was working the cone of light it was projecting barely stretched out a few feet.

The drone slowly spun around, shining its cone of light over the dark interior, revealing a large yellow construction vehicle with a large scoop on the front. It also revealed two more trucks, a few chests of tools, and various other garage stuff. When it had barely made a full circle, its light dimmed considerably, slowly floating back to the door.

When it was just a few feet away, it bobbed in the air as if its lift was cutting in and out. It only just managed to reach us, with me reaching through the doorway to grab it before it fell to the ground. A quick check showed that the battery had been completely drained.

"Well... so much for fifteen minutes," I said, shaking my head. "What now?"

"You didn't see it?" Tessa asked, now peering back into the once again pitch-dark warehouse. "It was over under the front wheel of the white and red truck."

"What was?"

"The cache!" She said, turning back to look at me. "It was a straight shot... I'm going to go in and get it."

"What? Are you nuts?" I asked, reaching out to grab her arm before she could step inside, getting a harsh look in return. "Look... I'll go in and grab it. You stay out here and-"

"Let go of me. Now."

I dropped her arm quickly, not wanting to piss her off any more than necessary. Besides, I had already closed the door with my foot.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have grabbed you, but I'm the one who is supposed to be taking hits, remember?" I pointed out. "I wasn't volunteering because I didn't think you couldn't handle it."

"Fine, I understand, but you didn't see it. Can you tell me where the truck was?" She asked, smirking when I frowned. "Exactly. Now get out of the way."

"Okay, okay, fine, but at least wrap a rope around your waist so I can pull you back if shit goes sideways."

Reluctantly she agreed, and I dug through my pack to pull out the fifty or so feet of cord, which Tessa had called Paracord. She took it from me and tied up an impromptu harness, wrapping it around herself before handing the extra back to me.

"Satisfied?" She asked.

"About as much as I can be," I admitted.

She nodded and stepped to the door, opening it and staring into the darkness. For a moment she stopped, taking a deep breath before stepping through the threshold. I let the cord lead out, ready to grab it and pull back if she called out for me. I had only let out a few feet before I had to stop, the cord going slack.

"Are you fucking serious?" Tessa called out angrily. "Get in here, Leon."

"What?" I asked, wondering if I had heard her correctly. "That sounds like a bad idea..."

"Just get in here!"

I waited for a few seconds before shaking my head and stepping through the dark doorway. I had only taken two steps before the darkness receded. It was still dark, but between a few visible holes in the roof, the light from the doorway and a completely open garage door in the back of the warehouse, the large space was pretty well lit up.

"...What the hell?" I asked, looking around.

"Look," Tessa said, pointing at the ground just in front of her.

I stepped a bit closer to my partner before following her finger. Written on the ground in black writing was the word "Surprise!"

"Mother fucker..." I cursed. "Goddammit, seriously?"

"So not only do we have to worry about the already dangerous things in this hell hole, as well as the artificially dangerous stuff we were warned about, we also need to worry about them just fucking with us?" Tessa asked out loud, looking around like she was trying to find the camera drones. "That's just fantastic."

We spent a minute unwrapping Tessa's harness, coiling it back up as we slowly recovered from our frustration and annoyance. Eventually, we did grab the green crate, which I elected to open inside since it seemed like we were safe.

The crate was about the size of a small piece of luggage, maybe a foot and a half wide and one deep, and opened from the center, the top splitting in half short to reveal its contents. I reached in and pulled out a pair of goggles. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I brought them up to my arm, letting my implant scan them before reading the projected description.

"Well, that's just...Really?" I said, shaking my head.

Tessa grabbed my arm and pulled it slightly so she had a better angle on the projection, reading the description quickly. She quickly got the gist and stood up, shaking her head.

"C'mon, I need to get out of here before I start saying something I regret," She said, prompting me to stand and follow her as we left the warehouse.

"Well... I guess I'll keep them," I said as we left. "Night vision goggles will probably come in handy."

Tessa gave me a look as she pulled on her pack, throwing me mine. I clipped the goggles to my belt before slinging my bag over my shoulder, shrugging on the half-full pack.

"Hey, it's not that big of a deal," I pointed out as we left the front office, the broken bell making another dull, muted ring. "At least there aren't thousands and thousands of people watching them fuck with us."

This time, her glare was followed up by a punch to the shoulder, hard enough to activate my protective barrier.

## Chapter 7

Between Tessa's frustration and a determination not to waste any more time, we pushed ourselves as we put the warehouse incident behind us. After about an hour or so of walking, Tessa let out a long sigh.

"Sorry, for snapping at you," Tessa apologized, turning around as she walked to face me.

"It's fine. I grew up knowing what kind of crap Nobles like to pull. I'm honestly surprised it took them that long to do something like that," I admitted, shaking my head. "There are a lot of stories about what some of the... morally loose nobles can do when they get vindictive or just bored."

"Your world... Don't get me wrong, it's better than here by a long mile, but..."

"I get it, trust me," I responded. "But there isn't much anyone can do. It's just the way things are."

"See, that's what I'm talking about, what you just said? That sounds so... wrong to hear," She said, shaking her head. "How do you just accept that they have that kind of power over you? Over everyone? Why are they in charge?"

"Because their power isn't dependent on what the lowies think," I explained. "It's not a democracy with a few corrupt people on top. They are in control, and they keep anything that could come even close to giving us a fighting chance at change to themselves. Any opportunity to stop them from controlling everything has long since passed."

"But-"

"But nothing," I said, shaking my own head. "Here, I'll explain it like my dad explained to me when I was a kid."

I stopped and picked up a rock, holding it out to her to see. After a moment, Tessa stopped and looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"What would you do if you hated the color of this rock? Any other color would be fine, as long as it's not this color."

"I... could paint it?" She suggested dubiously, narrowing her eyes at me, trying to figure out my angle.

"Right. So you go out, buy paints and then paint it. The next day you come back and find the paint has been washed off with water. What do you do?"

"Buy waterproof paints," She said sarcastically, as if she had found a loophole.

"Great! The next day, you find that it's been washed off with a paint remover. What next?"

Now a little annoyed, she turned and started walking away. I smirked and shrugged.

"And now you know why half of the world just accepts it," I said, following after her, rock still in my hand. "They either don't care enough to do anything or ignore it because they can't handle it."

"Fine, then I paint it and hide it so they can't wash it off," She said, still walking forward, not even turning back to talk to me.

"The next day, there is a perfect replica, in the original color, that has taken its place. It bothers you just as much."

"Then I find some of that hard sealant paint they use on industrial machines."

"They buy all the companies that make that and ban you from stores that sell it," I countered. "Then replace the rock with another exact replica."

"Where are you going with this Leon?" She asked, stopping and turning around again. "I appreciate the metaphor, but I'm not in the mood after the warehouse."

"The idea is that they are in control. No matter how many people stand up, they will win that fight. They have several times before," I explained, turning slightly and throwing the rock into a nearby copse of trees. "They are holding all the cards, and the deck is stacked. They are marking the cards, have an ace up their sleeve, they bribed the dealer, bought the casino, and copyrighted the game. The only thing left to do is to make the best of it. And trust me, I know how frustrating that can be. Remember my sister and her illness?"

"I remember."

"Well, nobles can fix basically everything, they easily fixed her once I signed my contract. But those kinds of treatments were not available to us when we were just lowies. I could have saved up millions, and it wouldn't have mattered. It's bullshit, it fucking sucks... but there isn't much anyone can do about it. Not anymore."

"That's... very depressing."

"It is, but remember. If we make it home, we will be nobles too. I plan on coming up with a way to use that to help people."

That idea perked her up, a smirk that promised plenty of malicious compliance on her face. I didn't have the heart to tell her our options to help would likely be limited by what our fellow nobles would allow. I was willing to push a little, but I would *not* put the security and future of my family at risk.

I just hope she could understand that when the time came.

We continued walking for a while, mostly silently, save a few times I pointed something out to her, or she made us slow down when we came across some relatively fresh tracks. We debated stopping for the day as the sun started to sink lower, both of us keeping an eye out for a place to stay.

"Even with us going to Bakersfield, *and* wasting our morning with that stupid warehouse, we are making good time," Tessa pointed out during a break, both of us passing the cooling canteen back and forth. "I would rather tackle a challenge in the morning, especially because it's a blue."

With no reason to disagree, we started circling around, looking off the main road for shelter. Eventually, while exploring a ransacked restaurant, we discovered that the freezer was completely cleaned out. What should have been a rotted mess of mold was actually a relatively clean space with a very heavy-duty door.

With a place to sleep, we started preparing for the night. Tessa spent ten minutes yanking the mostly intact cushions out of some booths in the restaurant's dining area while I went through the rest of the building. Once our bed was set up and I had confirmed we were alone, we spent an hour scavenging for food, managing to find a few cans of soda in a separate store, as well as a can of soup, which we actually heated up in a pan, with a small fire.

"When we get home, both of us are going to have to be careful not to get fat," I said as I finished my large portion. "We haven't been going hungry, but if just heating up some seventy-year-old tasted that good, I'm worried what actual food is going to feel like."

"You're worried? I've been living off of beans and canned meat for years," Tessa pointed out. "You've already seen what little fresh food I got from trading with John."

"Fuck, that's true. Noble food is going to break you..."

"Is it that good?" She asked skeptically. "I can't imagine food being good enough to do that."

"I didn't either, but it's like it's been scientifically designed to be delicious and still somehow be healthy," I explained. "I barely scratched the surface before coming here, but even that was amazing."

We talked for a while longer, eventually putting out the small fire we made and making our way back to the cleared-out freezer. Tessa sliced off the exterior handle with her safety knife, the hunk of metal falling to the ground, one side red hot from the cut. Now, the only way to open the door was the emergency lever on the inside. Or by cutting off the hinges, which were also accessible from the inside.

With our temporary lodgings about as secure as we could make them, we closed the door and immediately realized the issue.

"Holy shit, it's dark in here," I said.

"And your drone is still dead, isn't it?"

"Yup."

Tessa let out a string of curses before we both started fumbling around in the dark. After a few minutes and a few more curses, Tessa managed to find her lighter, which she flicked open and clicked on. The blue and purple plasma loop cast an eerie light over us, still perfectly silent. We rushed around for a minute, getting everything set up with the meager light, before Tessa clicked it shut.



"Look... there is no reason to keep watch in here," She said in the completely dark room. "We are sealed inside, and we won't be able to hear anything outside through the insulation and the seal around the door. Not to mention that anything that is able to break in here will wake us up in the process. Let's just get some sleep."

I considered her words for a moment before nodding in agreement. Not long after that, we both laid down on the repurposed seat cushions. I was immediately very glad that I didn't have to keep watch, as between the total darkness and near complete silence, it would have been incredibly difficult to stay awake and not go a bit crazy doing absolutely nothing. The bed we cobbled together was a bit tight as we had only grabbed enough for one person, but thankfully, the cushions were wide enough that we both had room.

We woke up the next morning to an uncomfortably hot and stuffy room, with both of us a tangle of limbs. Tessa laughed when I woke up and apologized before thumping me lightly on the chest and telling me to get up. We quickly stood up and started feeling around for the door, quickly opening it and stepping out into the cool morning air.

"A bit later than I was hoping," Tessa said as we grabbed everything and made our way out of the restaurant. "But still plenty early."

After a quick check of the map, we made a beeline for the first labeled green cache, skipping by a white marker in the process. As we walked, Tessa looked at me.

"What are you most looking forward to once you get back?" She asked, stepping over a large root that had cracked through the asphalt.

"You mean besides getting away from the constant threat of being killed and eaten by dozens of different kinds of mutated monsters, including people?" I jokingly asked, getting a soft snort as she looked back at the path in front of us. "It will be nice to not have to walk everywhere."

"Really? That's what you're looking forward to?"

"No, of course not. I'm looking forward to having dinner with my family again," I explained. "Dinner has always been an important event for us, especially after my dad died."

"That sounds nice," She responded, looking at me when I scoffed.

"You say that you're not going to be enjoying it, too," I said, rolling my eyes at her wide-eyed look. "Tessa, never mind what I want, but if you think my mom isn't going to want you to stay with us, you're insane."

"I'm... just not sure how I'm going to respond to being around people again," She admitted. "It's been a long time since I've been around more than one person at a time."

"Then we will figure it out," I assured her. "They claimed you were signing up to the same contract as what I got, which means you should be getting your own apartment."

"That's good..."

"But you're not getting out of dinner."

"Fine, fine, I'll eat with your family," She agreed with a laugh and nodded, seemingly accepting the requirement. "I suppose I will have to get used to it sooner or later."

"Exactly. Now, I think we are getting close..."

I pulled up my map with a tap on my arm, the projection showing we had deviated slightly off course but that we were almost to the first marked green cache. It was a few blocks down and three to the right of the road we were currently walking, which seemed to be a completely suburban area.

After another fifteen minutes of walking, we had finally arrived, or at least arrived in the general area. The cache was in the middle of a massive field, which *somehow* was completely clear. It even looked like the grass had been cut recently, though spread through the massive field were several dozen depressions. Each of them was around the dimensions of a person, spread eagle on their back. When we got closer, we stopped in a slightly overgrown parking lot, which led into the field through a broken-down gate.

"Okay, this is disconcerting," I said, looking around nervously. "How is the grass so short? And what are those gaps?"

"It's fake turf," Tessa explained. "Do you guys not have that?"

"Nope, definitely not," I said, clearly lying. "Never heard of it."

"Yeah, sure. Well, it's still confusing because most fake turf I've seen still had stuff growing through it," She admitted suspiciously. "Not nearly as much as a normal field, but more than this... this is something else."

I opened my mouth to say something before we both spotted something on the far end of the field. A large mutated bird swooped down to land on the field, completely oblivious to us. Both of us ducked low instinctually anyway, only to slowly stand as the bird landed and began to move around the open area.

After a few seconds of us watching the bird, the ground seemed to explode underneath it, the mutant bird disappearing in a shower of dirt, rocks, and chunks of fake grass. There was no sound beyond the dirt and rocks hitting the ground again, despite the fact that it looked like a

decent-sized explosion happening just under the large bird. When the dust cleared, there was a new depression and no sign of the avian mutant.

"... So... I figured out what the depressions are," I said, Tessa silently nodding her head in agreement.

## Chapter 8

Both of us had almost immediately dropped down after the explosion of dirt went off under the mutated bird, getting as low as possible. After a moment of staring into the field, we made our way to the nearest cover, a large fallen tree that crushed some of the metal fence that ran along our side of the large clearing. When nothing beyond the explosion happened, I looked at Tessa.

"Any ideas?"

"No," She admitted easily, eyes locked on the field. "I have no fucking idea what that was."

"Oh, good. That's good."

We watched the field for another ten minutes, but during that time, absolutely nothing happened. By the fifteen-minute mark, Tessa gave up and sat back against the large tree we were using as cover.

"Okay... so I do remember my Grandpa telling a story about a military base that they stayed in when he was younger, just after the Calamity, when people started being evacuated from cities. To keep from being attacked by mutants in the middle of the night, the military put down something called a mine. Like a snare, but it explodes."

"I know what a mine is," I said, getting a distracted nod back. "I don't think this is a minefield. If that had been an explosive mine, then there would have been a sound, probably a flash of fire or something."

"Alright... Well, that's all I got."

I frowned and looked around, leaning over to a sizable chunk of rock. I tossed it in the air and caught it, getting a sense of its weight before standing up, pulling back, and hurling it as far as I could. With my enhanced strength, I managed to throw the hunk of black rock about five hundred feet, where it slammed into the ground and continued to roll until finally coming to a stop.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, until the ground under the stone bulged upward, like something sizable was pushing up from underneath. There was no explosion this time.

"Fucking hell, there is something under the field," Tessa said, having stood up to watch me throw the rock. "It must have felt the impact."

"And it didn't attack because the rock stopped moving," I finished. "Damn... okay, that explains why there aren't any trees growing through the turf, moving around would keep any roots from forming."

"How the hell are we supposed to get the cache if it's surrounded like that?"

"It is a blue reward," I pointed out. "We usually have to kill our way in to get those."

We sat there for a minute or two, trying to figure out how we would get to the prize without getting eaten by whatever the hell was under the turf.

"Okay, the first thing we need to figure out is how fast it can move," Tessa suggested. "Throw a rock in two different places, one after the other."

I nodded in agreement, reaching down to grab two more rocks. After a second to prepare myself, I hurled one into the field, watching it soar across before slamming into the ground. A few seconds later the ground under it bulged again, and I threw the second, this one much closer to us, just between two of the nearest low points that marked the mutants emergent points.

The bulge under the first rock receded quickly, whatever was causing it visibly turning under the turf. It sank down deeper, the bulge receding, before coming back up under the second stone just around ten seconds later. This time, the bulge was large enough to tear the turf, a flash of dark purple exposed through the tear before it sank below the dirt again. The closer stone had also made it easier to see the scale of the mutant, which I was guessing was only four or five meters long, and a meter and some change wide.

"That was like... four hundred feet in around ten seconds," Tessa commented. "That's pretty fucking fast, Leon... I know you can't move that fast..."

"Not even close," I admitted, not really wanting to even ask. "Do you think..."

"That I could run that fast?" She finished. "Maybe? We've never measured, but it looked pretty close. Why?"

"I don't know, just trying to figure out a plan."

"What if I just sprint across?" She suggested. "And you run in after me, grab the crate and run back?"

"What if you can't outrun it?" I asked. "And if you can, what if it realizes that and gives up to go after me?"

"Fuck..."

"... What if it wasn't hungry?" I asked. "If we fed it a bunch, would it still go after us?"

"What, like kill some stuff and throw it into the field?" She asked, getting a nod in return. "I... If it was anything else, I would say no. Normal mutants kill humans for no reason, even when they aren't hungry. But whatever this is can't see us-"

"We assume," I pointed out, Tessa nodding in agreement, albeit a bit reluctantly.

"We assume," She repeated. "Okay... Let's call that plan B."

"What's plan A then?"

"I haven't gotten that far."

We sat there for a few more minutes, spitballing ideas and passing the colling canteen back and forth. Eventually, Tessa stood up and dusted off her pants.

"Alright, just sitting here scaring ourselves about everything that could go wrong isn't helping," She said. "Let's try out some of our ideas. Maybe one of them will work."

"Oh boy, experimenting with the giant underground worm mutant," I said, standing up as well. "Can't wait."

Our first experiment had me pulling out an eight-foot-tall, rust-covered but still intact fence poll from across the field parking lot. Once upon a time it held up a chain link fence that surrounded a separate building, but by now all of the chain had rusted away in some spots, causing it to all fall apart. With some elbow grease, enhanced strength and Tessa's help I managed to pull one from the ground, carrying it back to the edge of the field. Tessa used her safety knife to slice one end of the cylindrical pole to a point, making it look like a massive, rusted needle.

Once the tip had cooled down, I slowly got as close to the edge of the field as I could, stopping just where the asphalt off the parking lot stopped. I held the end of the pole and started slapping the fake grass in front of me as far into the field as I could reach without compromising my balance. Tessa stood next to and just behind me, her hand on her pistol, chewing her lip nervously as she waited.

After a full minute of me tapping the ground with the pole and the mutant not responding in any way, I stopped, pulling back the pole.

"Okay... maybe its territory doesn't reach this far?" I suggested.

"Which means we will have to go further in."

"Yeah... Or we could try something else..." I said. "When I say, throw me my axe."

I stepped back, grabbed a rock, and took a few steps onto the field, doing my best to ignore the flips my stomach did as I did. Once I was a few steps past where I had been slapping the ground with the fence pole. I stopped, wound up and hurled the rock as far as I could, managing to get it further than I had the first time.

"Now, throw it!" I said, turning back to Tessa, who quickly threw my axe to me.

I caught it by the handle, turning back just in time to see the bulge of the subterranean mutant form just under the rock. The second I saw it, I ran forward, full tilt for a good fifty feet, just by where I had thrown the closer rock to test the mutant's speed. I slammed the sharpened pole into the ground, managing to bury it about a foot into the ground. I jumped and grabbed the pole, my flashbang gloves gripping it tightly as I threw my weight into it once, twice, three times, managing to get it two feet further into the surprisingly soft dirt. I slammed my axe into the top, driving it one last foot into the ground, the eight-foot-tall rusted poll now only sticking up by four feet. My job done, I turned and ran, moving as fast as I could and jumping off the turf and back onto the parking lot.

"Holy fuck," I said, breathing heavily, looking back at the field to see the mutant go back underground, the turf flattening out again. "How close was it?"

"You don't want to fucking know," Tessa responded, her eyes wide and face a little pale. "Though I was going to have to run after you and pull you out of something's teeth."

I shook my head and took a long few minutes to recover, my hands a bit shaky from the adrenaline. When I was finally good, I started gathering rocks, Tessa helping after a moment. When we each had several rocks, I explained what we were doing.

"Try and get each one as close to the pole as possible," I explained. "I think the difference between it coming up and taking out the bird, and just coming up under the rocks I've been throwing is that they aren't moving once they hit the ground."

She nodded, and together we started throwing, alternating so there was as little gap as possible. We managed to get everything in the same general area as the pole, and just after I threw my fourth rock, the subterranean mutant struck.

The first sign of the oncoming attack was a slight rumble. It was barely noticeable, but only a few seconds after it started it was cut off by an explosion of dirt, rock and chunks of turf. It was the same as with the bird, but this time much closer, letting us see the monster behind the cloud of dust.

A massive beaked mutant, a cross between a worm and an armadillo, screeched loudly enough to hurt my ears as it attacked the pole. Unlike when it had attacked the bird, though, this time it did not return down into the ground. Instead, the top half shook and swung around, the pole stuck down its throat, its three-part beak face opening up and quivering. The pole was buried into it, disappearing from view into its three-sided jaws.

"We need to kill it before it goes back down!" I shouted, grabbing my axe and charging out into the field.

I could hear Tessa cursing behind me as she moved to follow, keeping up with me easily. As we got closer, I could make even more details out on the multi-meter-long mutant. It was plated with organic armor plates, each a much darker purple than the skin behind it. I could see its muscles clench and twitch as it struggled with the pole jammed into its body. As I got close enough, I wound up and slammed my axe into its side, the axe head slamming between two plates, chopping a deep wound into its side.

Again, the creature screeched, though this time, it was a choking, gurgling screech that splattered me with dark black blood. The large creature swung its body around, reacting to my attack by trying to bowl me over with its exposed top half. I managed to dodge, stepping back out of the way as it moved, only to step back in and hit it with my axe again, chopping another deep wound into its side.

It swung itself around again, this time managing to bind the head of my axe inside itself, stuck between two shifting armor plates. I tried just a second too long to yank my weapon free, giving the mutant creature enough time to slam into me its armored head. I released my axe and raised my arms up to absorb some of the impact, only for my shield to absorb all of the initial blow. Unfortunately, even as my shield prevented me from being slammed into a fine red paste, the abominable worm still swung through, meaning I was lifted off of my feet and sent tumbling backward several feet, stopping on my back. I could feel my brain trying to work through the tumbling and impacts, managing to roll over and climb to my feet.

Only to watch as Tessa fired an arrow nearly point-blank into the first deep cut I made into the mutated creature's hide. Her arrow sank deeply into its flesh, almost half of the shaft disappearing. The creature screeched again, my ears ringing as it squirmed and swung its head wildly, trying to smash whatever was hurting it. Fortunately, Tessa was far enough away that its massive beaked and armored head couldn't reach her.

Unfortunately, it also had a four-foot metal pole sticking out of its head, which was long enough to reach her.

It swung wildly, the metal pole whistling through the air. Tessa noticed the added danger in time to turn away from the impact, raising her arm so the metal bar slammed into her forearm and shoulder instead of her head. The blow lifted her off her feet, spinning her around tossing her back almost as far as I had been. It also sent the snapping sound of breaking bone echoing through the field. My partner tumbled to a stop and laid still, face to the ground, her arm bent at an unnatural angle. Unmoving.

I shouted in rage and charged at the worm, knowing that I needed to kill it before it could recover before it finished us off. I covered the distances in only a few long bounds, grabbing the pole as it swung around, ignoring the pain its screeches were causing me and the bruise that catching the pole would undoubtedly give me.

The impact of the catch lifted me off my feet, but I managed to hold on, my feet touching the ground for just a moment. I slammed myself against the pole, using my weight and strength to stab it deeper into the mutant's body. It screamed again, squirming and flailing to try and dislodge the pipe impaling it. It lifted me off my feet again, this time high off the ground, hard enough that if I had lost my grip on the pole, it would have probably flung me a quarter of the way down the field.

But I did hold on, managing to swing around the momentum and once again slam my weight down into the pole. Something inside the disgusting creature finally gave out, and the pole dug down another foot and a half. Black blood poured from the end of the pole, and the entire abomination shook once, before going limp and collapsing to the ground, throwing me to the side in the process.

For a moment, I lay there, waiting for my head to stop spinning and the world to stay still, before slowly staggering to my feet again, heading directly for Tessa's still unmoving form.

## Chapter 9

I stumbled a few times before finally getting my bearings properly, just in time to kneel next to Tessa. I immediately checked her pulse, letting out a sigh of relief when I found it easily. I slowly rolled her over onto her back, mentally crossing my fingers that any damage I might be doing to her by moving her would be healed by her healing upgrades.

"Tessa? Tessa, can you hear me?" I asked, not wanting to nudge or move her any more than I already had.



I cursed when she remained still, taking a deep breath and looking around, nervous about being out in the open when I was distracted by taking care of Tessa.

"Okay... We need to move somewhere safer," I said. "Treeline, for now, a building after you wake up."

I cursed under my breath again as I gently lifted Tessa's unconscious from, trying my best to jostle her as little as possible, wincing every time I caught a look at her arm. Her forearm had an obvious break, the usually straight portion of her left forearm bent at an unnatural and nauseating angle. When I had her in a princess carry, I looked around and picked a random patch of trees, heading across the field, moving as carefully as possible and avoiding the various divots and tears in the turf.

When I got to the patch of trees, I gently laid my partner down at the base of the biggest one before carefully checking her again for wounds or blood. All I could find was a cut and serious bump along the side of her head, luckily not near her temple, that was already forming a scab. I grabbed our canteen and washed it off, just to make sure it wasn't worse than it looked at first glance.

The cold water dripping down her head finally woke the unconscious woman, who started and tensed, only to curse loudly as she felt her injuries.

"Fuck... that hurt," She said when she finally calmed down. "What happened?"

"The pole that was jabbed into its mouth? It swung around and clobbered you," I explained, stopping when she gave me an odd look.

"What pole?"

"Right, you got knocked unconscious fighting a blue cache-level mutant. Big scary worm thing," I explained, gesturing back out into the field. "I killed it after you got hit."

"Right... okay... certainly feels like I got knocked out..." She said, moving her arm only to curse again. "Oh fuck, that's really broken, oh fuck!"

"It's alright!" I said, trying my best to keep her from freaking out. "Your healing upgrades will fix it, you're gonna be fine. We just need to set it properly and the serums will do the rest."

"Right... sure, no problem... Alright," she said, clearly working through the confusion from her head injury and trying to remember what to do. "We need two straight sticks and... something to secure my arm...Fuck I can barely think straight... head hurts just as much as my arm."

"I think you hit your head on the ground, maybe a rock," I explained as I looked around. "Could have been worse, trust me."

It took me about a minute to find two straight sticks sturdy enough, and I brought them back to Tessa, who was idly staring at her hand. She looked out of it, and I quickly snapped my fingers to get her attention.

"Hey, don't let yourself go alright?" I said, kneeling down beside her. "I'm pretty sure the healing serums will take care of you, but I don't want you falling asleep until they have a chance to work."

"Yeah, that's bad," She said, shaking her head a bit and wincing. "Okay, we need to set my arm. It's gonna suck, but we need to do it."

She spent the next few minutes working me through the process of setting her arm before I was finally ready. I gently wrapped my hand around both ends of the break, doing my best to ignore her twitches and hissing winces. When my grip was secure, I nodded to her.

"Okay... on the count of three," She said, closing her eyes and looking away. "One... two..."

Before she got to three, I pushed and guided the bones in her arm back to their proper place, my partner letting out a choked scream, groaning as she recovered from the sudden adjustment. For a moment, it looked like she was going to pass out, her eyes fluttering before she let out another groan of pain, opening her eyes wide. When she recovered enough, she gave me an angry look.

"You did *not* need to do that," She explained, exasperated and breathing heavily. "I wasn't tensing up!"

"Oh... gotcha. Sorry," I responded, doing my best to sound apologetic while not throwing up.

"Whatever, just wrap it up as best you can, keep it straight," She said, holding out her arm.

I attached the splints to her arm, using a length of cord and a long bandage wrap to secure them as best as I could. When I was done, she nodded, poking at a few places to test how I had done.

"Good enough. Now we need to move," She said, holding her good hand up. "We are probably good for a bit, but something will eventually smell that corpse."

I nodded and helped her to her feet, holding on to her as she swayed slightly.

"Fuck... I'm gonna have to lean on you Leon, I'm dizzy as hell," She cursed, and I shifted so she could put her good arm around my shoulder.

Together, we slowly made our way back to the parking lot, where we had been studying the turf field and where most of our stuff was. She leaned against the tree we had used for cover as I made my way back to the mutant worm thing's corpse. I tore my axe from its body, putting a foot on its side and yanking it free with two hands. After that, I pulled out the single arrow from the mutant's side and grabbed Tessa's bow, ferrying them back to the parking lot.

With both our weapons recovered, I crossed the rest of the field and kneeled by the blue cache, waving my arm next to it. It was a large chest, which by now I had learned meant very little about what was inside. A seam opened all the way around with a hiss, allowing me to lift the top up and over, revealing its contents. Sitting in the protective insulation was a grip of some sort, like the hilt of a sword. Not really willing to stick around and find out what exactly it was, I clipped it to my belt and quickly stood, heading right back to where I left Tessa.

When I got back, I found her trying to put her pack back on, one-handed and still unsteady from what was clearly a concussion. I helped her put it on, clipping her bow into its place under her arm before grabbing my own stuff.

"Where should we go?" I asked. "Back to the freezer?"

"No. We don't have time to backtrack that much," She said, shaking her head and wincing. "We need to keep making progress."

"Okay, let's head back into the town and look for somewhere to stay. You need time before we start hiking again."

She nodded and stood, wobbling a bit before steadying herself. I let her wrap her arm around my shoulder again before heading back out into the wrecked and overgrown town. We passed by several ruined buildings before finally stumbling upon one that was mostly still standing. Neither of us could figure out what it was, not that Tessa was at the top of her game. Even so, it was made mostly from concrete cinder blocks, so it would at least be marginally safe.

As we made our way inside, I had to use the remaining charge of Tessa's safety knife to cut through a thick lock, which was completely rusted shut. I left Tessa leaning against the exterior wall before stepping inside to make sure there weren't any hidden surprises. As I opened and checked the few rooms inside the small concrete structure, I discovered one that was mostly an empty room, save for a few shovels and outdoor gardening equipment stored on one side.

When I was sure nothing was hiding inside any of the other rooms, I went back outside and retrieved Tessa, who followed me inside, managing to move under her own power and stay upright, save a small stumble halfway to the room.

"My head is clearing up, I think," She said as she sat down in one of the room's corners. "Everything is a lot more stable."

"And that stumble was...?" I asked, the brunette survivor flipping me off with her good hand. "So, how long am I one-handed for?"

Before I responded, I focused on making the room safe, starting by blocking the door. I dragged a large, heavy-duty metal cabinet in front of the only entrance into the room, tipping it over in front of the door. When it was pressed firmly into place, I started jamming everything else I could move on top of it to secure it even better.

"The description for the healing serum said at our level, broken bones healed in about a week and a half, plus or minus a few days," I finally responded. "Beyond that, I don't know."

"Fuck... we definitely can't hang around that long," She said, shaking her head. "It would eat up all of our extra time."

"We can keep moving," I said. "You'll probably be good to walk by tomorrow, and I can handle the green crates."

"And the purple?" She asked, closing her eyes and rubbing her face. "That was going to be a death sentence with *both* of us."

"It was not going to be a death sentence..." I refuted, sitting down next to her now that the room was adequately barricaded. "And if we take it slow, we can get the purple in a week and a few days. Besides, I think we definitely end up using our guns on the vispers. You can shoot one-handed."

"Shoot one-handed? Are you out of your mind?" She asked, looking at me like she wanted to slap me. "I am not attacking a *VISPER* nest with a broken arm!"

"I just meant as a last resort," I responded, rolling my eyes. "If we take everything slow, take our time, it will be healed by the time we get there. We have enough time."

For a long moment, she was silent, her eyes switching between her arm and the barricaded doorway. After a full minute, she leaned back against the wall fully.

"Fine. It's still on the table," She said before raising her hand to stop me from talking. "But only if my arm is mostly healed by then. Seriously, I do not want to tackle something like a

nest with a useless arm. I don't have to be able to do a one-handed pull-up, but I need to be able to shoot my bow. Anything else *would* make it a death sentence."

"... Fine, that's reasonable," I said, laying my head back against the cinder block wall behind us. "I don't want to get us killed, Tessa. I'm just worried that whatever is waiting for us at the gold point is something we won't be able to handle without a bit more gear."

"I know Leon. I know,"

We were quiet for a while before I started putting together a basic meal. Salted meats, two cans of mixed vegetables, and a double serving for Tessa since her body would be working hard at healing her arm.

"We are going to have to do some scathing, or I'm going to eat all our light food," She pointed out as we both finished. "But that's fine since we will basically be killing time, waiting for my arm to heal. Tomorrow, we should travel in the morning and stop early, do some scavenging, and hunker down for the night."

I nodded, and once again, we were quiet, broken up by the occasional curse or groan as she shifted her arm. About an hour later of just sitting and passing the time, she looked up at me with a curious expression.

"What was in the cache?" She asked.

I slapped my forehead and reached down to my belt, unclipping the hilt and examining the reward properly. It was made from some sort of polished metal, with brass highlights that spread out into the guard, which was barely more than an accent, too small to do any good. I tapped it on my implant, projecting a description and confirming my suspicions of what it was. I hummed in appreciation, shifting the grip in my hand, making sure it was pointed in the right direction before thumbing the activation button.

With a snap, a gleaming metal blade extended from my hilt, extending out to just under two feet. It was a proper sword, sharp on both sides, though according to the description, it wasn't any sharper than a normal metal sword would be. What made it special was what happened when you hit something.

I reached out with the sword and slapped it against the wooden handle of a nearby shovel. The blade dug into the worn wood, but also let out a loud snap of electrical discharge, enough to make the hair on my arm stand up.

"Damn... it's a taser sword," I said, tapping the control button, the blade disappearing back into its handle. "Not unusually sharp, though it says you'll never need to sharpen it."

I looked at the hilt again before handing it to Tessa, who scoffed and refused to take it.

"And what good would it do me?" She asked. "I'm down and arm."

"Not permanently," I pointed out. "And I prefer my axe. Your machete is the closest to a sword."

She shook her head but reached out the deployable sword, examining it for a moment before activating it and examining the blade. After a minute or so, she deactivated it, deftly clipping the hilt onto her belt.

## Chapter 10

We spent the rest of the day resting, recovering, and just passing the time. We talked about what it was going to be like getting home, but Tessa was clearly and unsurprisingly distracted by her arm. She was in pain, but that wasn't the problem, at least not to her.

"I really fucked up," She said, shaking her head. "I should have seen that pole coming. I *knew* it was there."

"Tessa, a thousand and one things were going on at once," I pointed out. "I'm just glad it didn't hit your head directly. The healing serum is impressive, but I don't think it could fix your skull getting cracked like an egg."

"Why did I even get that close?" She asked, seemingly unimpressed by my counterargument. "I was shooting a bow, for fuck sake! I should have never gotten close enough to get hit in the first place."

"You were aiming for a tiny spot between its armored plates," I responded, opening my mouth to continue, only for Tessa to continue instead.

"Which was stupid in the first place. Should have aimed for its mouth," She countered.

"Please, four feet of the pole did nothing but piss it off. What do you think less than a foot of arrow would do?" I pointed out, frowning when Tessa didn't respond. "Hey! You fucked up, but we will get through this. It's just a week or so of roughness, and then we can tackle the visper nest."

She nodded silently, seemingly ready to drop the subject but clearly not agreeing with what I had said. I shook my head and slid a bit closer, sitting on her right, uninjured side.

"If anything, this is my fault. I've been playing the tank for so long now that you got used to having me cover for you. Then I got knocked back, leaving you open," I explained. "I should have been more aware of where you were."

She gave me a look that told me she wasn't buying my bullshit, but her small smile said she appreciated it anyway.

"Guess we will both have to do better next time," She said, getting a chuckle out of me.

"Sounds like it."

She nudged me with her elbow, but I could see that her smile had grown just a bit. We were quiet for a few minutes before something occurred to me.

"Do you think that thing has any edible meat on it?" I asked.

"I'm not eating meat from a fucking purple worm mutant," She said, looking at me in disgust.

"You sure? Sounds kinda poetic, eating the thing that put you on your ass," I suggested, chuckling when she shivered in distaste. "Might even be good."

"No way in hell," She said, doubling down. "If we weren't decked out in durable stuff already, I would suggest going back and seeing if those armored plates were worth cutting off to make armor, but that is it."

Eventually, after a few more hours of idle talking and passing the time, we ate again, mostly because Tessa was already hungry again, and decided to head to sleep. Tessa was pretty sure her concussion was already gone, proving her point by standing up on her own and walking around the room with no issues. Between that and the fact that I was reasonably sure the healing serums would prevent any issues stemming from concussions anyway, we both agreed she should be fine catching some sleep.

The following morning, I woke up pretty early, getting up and moving around. We switched off watch at some point in the night, and she passed the time by building a better splint from the tools around the room. It was impressive what she had gotten done one-handed, creating three wooden rods and two metal plates that I helped her weave together and strap to her arm. She hissed in pain a few times, but the new splint would definitely do a better job of keeping her arm straight and protected.

When we finally left our temporary shelter, after clearing out all the stuff I had stacked in front of the door, we set a decent pace toward our next target, the first green cache on the way to the purple visper nest. Ordinarily, we could have crossed the distance in a day and a half,

maybe even just a day, if we pushed ourselves, but with Tessa needing more time to heal, we took our time.

Tessa stuck close to me out of necessity, her good hand on her pistol most of the time as we walked, as well as when we scavenged with our "free" time. Her temporary disability clearly put her on edge, but she managed to keep her cool.

"Have you ever been injured like this before?" I asked as we prepared a basement to serve as another safe house for the night.

"Not this badly, no," She admitted, fiddling with the sling we had put together from a scavenged t-shirt. "I dislocated my right arm once, but that was back when I was still part of the Bakersfield scavenging team, so my dad just popped it back in and escorted me home. I'm also pretty sure I've had a concussion before as well. It was a bitch to get back, but I just basically just hung out in the APC for a few days until the symptoms cleared up. What about you?"

"Eh.... I've gotten injured a few times. Being a courier like I was can be dangerous. People need stuff delivered to neighborhoods that normal delivery services refuse to go to or need stuff that isn't exactly legal," I explained with a shrug. "I've broken my leg, a few ribs, got my head rattled a few times... Oh, and I got shot once."

"You got *shot!*" She asked, looking at me with wide eyes. "How? Why?"

"I was delivering something, and someone wanted it bad enough to try and kill me," I said with a shrug, conveniently forgetting that, at the time, I had been anything but casual about it. "Guns work a bit differently in my world. They can be plenty lethal, but the one I was shot with was designed to be 'safe'. I would still be super dead if it hit something important, but it hit my arm. I was back to work like three days later."

"Your world is crazy," She said, sitting down heavily on a sturdy-looking storage box.

"To be fair, I had a particularly dangerous job because I needed as much money as possible for Olivia," I explained with a shrug. "The most dangerous thing I had to worry about at the garage was pulling a muscle. Or a random noble coming in to start trouble."

"A noble like the people we will be surrounded by?" She asked with a raised eyebrow, shaking her head when I winced. "Right, sorry if I don't feel full of confidence."

I opened my mouth to respond, only to stop when I realized that I didn't feel confident about my statement either. I seemed to have a knack for finding trouble, and being surrounded by nobles was bound to cause an issue eventually.

Once everything was set up in the basement, we headed back out to do some light scavenging before calling it a day. Tessa was eating even more than we had anticipated, so



finding some food was becoming increasingly important. Luckily, we were in a relatively untouched neighborhood, the dilapidated and overgrown houses seemingly fresh and free of previous looters. In only a few hours, we found several shelf-stable cans of food and a few sealed water and soda cans.

Both of us lamented the lack of hot food as we ate, having spoiled ourselves the last time we started a fire to heat our dinner. In the end, Tessa ate just short of three times the amount that I did, shocking both of us.

"We underestimated how calorie-hungry our enhanced healing is," Tessa pointed out, finishing a can of beans.

"It could be worse," I pointed out. "Imagine if you didn't have a metabolism enhancement. We might not have been able to keep up, which would slow down your healing. Would probably have to skip the vispers."

"Oh no, that would be terrible," She responded mockingly with a completely blank face and monotone voice. "I would hate for that to happen."

We kept up a similar pattern for the next two days, traveling a small amount before scavenging and settling down for the night, giving Tessa more time to heal and giving us more time to find food for her enhanced healing to burn through. Similarly to the previous blue cache, when we got within thirty minutes of the green cache, we decided to stop, find a place to hunker down and wait to approach for the next morning. I wanted as much of an advantage as possible since I would be doing all of the action myself.

The following day we adjusted Tessa's splint, ate some breakfast, and headed off, making a beeline to the green cache. A surprisingly quick investigation showed that the challenge was pretty simple: uncover the crate from under the rubble of a decent-sized house. Tessa laughed that I would basically be doing manual labor to earn the crate but immediately stopped when we realized that the rubble was infested with a nest of mutated rats the size of a big loaf of bread. Each one had massive buck teeth and would screech when exposed to sunlight.

Tessa ended up following me around, skewering the rats I uncovered on her deployable spark sword, the zapping function turned off so she didn't waste its charge. She managed to keep me pretty well covered, considering she was in a moderate amount of pain from her injury, not to mention one-handed.

Unfortunately, I was still bitten several times, all of them biting through the skin and drawing a shocking amount of blood; even if my wounds healed in a few hours, it was still disturbing. Tessa seemed to find it even more horrifying than I did, nearly panicking before remembering I was immune to being sick.

"I've heard stories about the kind of shit scav rats carry," She explained with a shiver. "Never had to see it, thankfully, but from what I heard, it's not fun. If it wasn't you or me, I'd say just chew a bullet to save the suffering."

Three hours and twenty-seven scat rats later, I pulled the green cache out of the rubble, covered in sweat, grime, and blood, both mine and the rats. I dragged the cache away from the collapsed house, laying it on a pile of wood and junk, unlocking it with a swipe of my arm.

The smaller cache, no bigger than a briefcase, opened up with a familiar hiss, letting me open it up completely. Inside was a single self-injecting vial filled with a gray substance that both Tessa and I recognized, a serum that I couldn't take, even if I wanted to.

"It's your lucky day," I said, scanning it over my arm despite knowing it was a speed serum already. "You are going to be ridiculously fast."

I reached over to hand her the vial, which she took from me after clipping the spark sword back to her belt.

"Is... this safe to take while I'm injured like this?" She asked, looking up from the vial.

"... Maybe we should wait a while, just to be sure."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea," She agreed, sliding the vial into her pack. "I'll take it before we tackle the visper nest, at least."

The slow but steady progress continued for another three days. Along the way, we remembered we were supposed to be looking for stuff to bring back with us, prompting us to start looking through jewelry boxes and the like on top of kitchens and pantries. The most interesting thing that we found, which we decided to split when we eventually sold it, was four dozen sealed, almost perfectly preserved gold and silver coins. They were carefully stored inside a large safe, which took us about thirty seconds to open with Tessa's safety knife. Tessa noted that it had to be special in some way as she didn't recognize them from the usual coins found all over the place.

"With our luck, the guy who lived here was crazy, and they are just really shiny subway tokens," Tessa joked before explaining what a subway token was.

When we finally called it a night, once again a relatively short distance from our next target, Tessa and I pulled off her splint, letting her move her arm for the first time in just about six days.

"How does it feel?" I asked as she slowly moved her fingers and wrist.

"Sore... it definitely hurts, but I can move it, so that's a good sign," She said, wincing when she touched it with her good hand. "Still very tender, too. But considering it was very broken not too long ago, that's still pretty good."

"Well, let's put the brace and your sling back on," I said, shaking my head. "We are cutting it close already. We can't afford setbacks."

"Yeah, yeah, strap me back up," she said, holding out her hand, letting me re-attach her splint.

Once I was done, we ate almost all of the food we scavenged, as well as some of the lighter rations. Tessa was still eating way more than me, which was encouraging since it meant her healing was still in overdrive.

Without much more to do after that, we called it an early night, Tessa staying up to take the first watch.

## Chapter 11

Our strategy of taking it slow continued the next day as we woke up, had breakfast, and headed out into the morning. Once again, Tessa ate more than I did, more than double her usual serving. At this point, we were seriously starting to cut into our lighter rations, the stuff we traded for at Bakersfield. It wouldn't have lasted forever anyway, but having an assured food source was a luxury we would sorely miss when it was gone. I did notice that she ate less than she did the previous day, which meant her body was slowly finishing its enhanced healing. Assuming we were correctly interpreting her increased appetite, at least.

We traveled a bit of distance through a wooded area, broken up occasionally by houses and a few businesses. The open woods, with occasional patches of mutated fauna that we could see, had Tessa on edge, her hand never too far away from her pistol or her new sword. Having spent my entire life surrounded by polycrrete buildings and ferrophalt paving, walking through a green, vibrant wooded area was interesting, but also had me on my toes, constantly wondering what was behind each tree and bush. Luckily, the fact that it was still early in the morning helped keep both of us calm and collected.

We continued to travel until we arrived at a more populated residential area. By then, it was early afternoon, and we were both heavily sweating in the humidity. We started looking for a place to stop for the day, eventually deciding on a well-kept, finished basement. We quickly checked through the rest of the house for anything dangerous. Once we were done with that, I spent an hour barricading everything but the external bulkhead entrance.

"Alright, I think that's good enough," Tessa said as she watched me push a heavy piece of furniture into place. "Getting out in a rush is important too."

I nodded and sat down on one of the dusty couches, enjoying the moderately cooler and drier air in the underground room. While I did, Tessa started opening cans and unwrapping some jerky, eventually passing me some of each. As I ate dinner and Tessa ate two, we talked about what the following day would entail.

"We could have probably reached the last green cache today, if we hadn't been taking it slow," I pointed out, swallowing the last bit of my beans while looking at the map. "Though pushing ourselves today would have sucked."

"It looks like we will get there early afternoon if we make the same time we did today," Tessa responded, leaning on me to look at the map. "Which raised the question..."

"Should tackle the cache tomorrow or the day after," I finished for her with a frown. "We are trying to kill time..."

"There is only so much time we can waste before I start feeling like we aren't doing enough," She said in response, fiddling with her arm brace. "Seriously, I'll go crazy eventually."

"We don't have to be doing nothing. The slow pace is the only reason we have had enough food to keep up with your increased appetite," I pointed out while shaking my head. "I don't think it's going to take that much more time."

"Yeah, yeah, fine," She said, finally relenting.

We sat for a few more minutes before Tessa stood up and stretched, wincing as she shifted her arm.

"I'm going to sleep. You can stay up and keep watch or sleep as well. I think we are fine either way."

She quickly wiped off one of the old couches, which was in surprisingly good condition. With a shrug, I brushed off the other one, wiping off the dust with an old blanket that had been laid across the couch's back. It was too warm to even consider using a blanket, but after shaking it out a bit it made a halfway decent pillow.

The next day wasn't all that different, all things considered. We woke up, ate breakfast, checked out packs and Tessa's brace before heading out. The weather was better, though it was still a bit more humid than I preferred. That said, it could have been much worse, and we made a good bit of progress despite our slow pace. Just as we predicted, we reached the green cache, or thirty minutes away from the challenge. We found an old garage with an apartment on top, similar to what we stayed in while on our way to the savagers.

With our sleeping spot picked out, we spent two hours scavenging for food, finding just enough for the night and morning before heading back to the garage. Tessa climbed up the stairs before I knocked them out, creating a temporary safe space for us. Once again, Tessa was anxious about making so little progress and crossing so little distance, and I did my best to assure her we would be fine. After dinner, we headed to bed, sharing a single queen size bed.

The following day, we both woke up early, immediately eating breakfast and heading out, making use of the calm morning to travel to the green cache. When we finally got within a reasonable distance, we started surveying the area, looking for what exactly we were dealing with.

The residential area we had been staying in had given way to a wide-open expanse of overgrown grass and bushes. Some of the fields had houses and other structures on them, some run down and near collapse, others overgrown with mutated vines. According to my map, the green cache was located in the large barn built alongside a large home. The barn was in relatively good shape, while the house had almost completely collapsed into a pile of rubble.

We slowly made our way closer to the massive field, stopping when we reached the edge that ran along the old broken-up road we had been traveling on.

"So... any ideas?" I asked, looking out across the nearly chest-high grass.

"...About what's waiting for us?" She asked skeptically. "Not a clue. But, there's a very long list of mutants that like to live in fields like this. Could be any of them or none of them."

"Right, well, it's green, so it shouldn't be lethal unless we fuck up," I pointed out, getting a skeptical look in return. "Fine, unless we fuck up or they are being assholes. Does that help narrow it down?"

"...Depends," She said after a moment of thinking.

"On what?"

"On if the challenge is getting to the barn... or if it's in the barn," She answered. "If the threat is in the tall grass, it could be a few things."

"Well, where is the driveway?" I asked, pulling up my map again.

We checked the map together, and sure enough, another hundred meters down the road, there was supposed to be a driveway. A quick walk later revealed a once-paved road that went off in the vague direction of the barn and house but broken up even worse than the road was. Still, it was a vague path, much less overgrown, to the point that we could actually see the ground in some places.

"Okay... So we push to the house on the driveway, keeping eyes peeled and taking it slow," Tessa suggested. "Then we stop at the house, try and find a position on the rubble to scan the barn. Sound good?"

I nodded, and she smiled, turning back to the driveway and stepping toward it. I reached out and snagged the back of her backpack, catching her before she could take the lead.

"Forgetting something?" I asked, tapping my chest armor and giving her a look, getting a sheepish chuckle in return.

"Yeah, right, fine," She said with an eye roll, gesturing for me to go forward first.

I hefted my axe and hiked up my backpack before stepping into the tall, wild grass, feeling the crumbled driveway asphalt shifting under my feet. I frequently switched between watching the ground and watching the tall grass, waiting for *something* to jump out and attack us. We weren't exactly being stealthy, every step forward pushing through the tall grass, making a rustling noise that any hunting animal would immediately identify.

About halfway down the driveway, I froze, holding up my hand to stop Tessa as well. As we both stopped moving, a separate source of rustling was just barely audible. I could hear Tessa pulling out her sword, the blade extending and ready as we waited for the rustling to get closer. After a few seconds, the rustling pushed out into the slightly less obscuring driveway path, revealing.

"Is that..." I whispered softly, the small, furry animal freezing from the sound.

It was a small rabbit, no bigger than a football, nibbling on something it found on the ground. After a moment of being frozen, it hopped forward, further into the slightly less grown-over path.

"Leon," Tessa said as softly as she could. "Take my bow, try-"

Before she could finish, the grass suddenly exploded with activity, a displacer leaping from the grass and pouncing on the rabbit, which nearly disappeared into an explosion of blood and fur.

"Fuck me!" I shouted as the mutant tore a bloody chunk from the small animal, cursing again when the mutant's head snapped up to look at us. "Oh hell..."

The mutant yowled and hissed at me, and suddenly, a half dozen other spots around us all started moving, patches of grass suddenly shifting to look in our direction.

"Fuck it, run!" Tessa shouted, pushing me forward.

I stumbled but managed to compensate, running forward along the overtaken driveway *towards* the displacer. It seemed confused, which Tessa took advantage of. She ran past me and lashed out with her sword, the hilariously sharp weapon slicing one of its legs off, sinking up into its neck. She yanked her sword free and stabbed it again before cursing and running, catching up with me easily.

We could hear the yowling, hissing, and spitting mutated felines behind us, chasing us as we cut a swath through the overgrown grass, kicking up dust and occasionally stumbling over uneven chunks of asphalt. Tessa had to visibly hold back to keep from leaving me behind, but with my strong, powerful strides, I was able to barely keep ahead of the chasing mutants.

When we finally got to the rotted, half-collapsed building that had once been a home, we immediately climbed into one of the more clear rooms. The awful racket that the mutant felines made trailed off, leaving us in a silence that neither of us believed for a second was actually peaceful.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by three mutants charging from one direction, jumping up onto the same rubble and trash-filled space as us. They easily kept their balance, walking forward slowly, haunched and ready to pounce.

"Charge them," Tessa said softly, surprising me enough to pause.

"What?"

"CHARGE THEM!" She shouted, running towards the mutants, sword raised.

The mutants took a step back, shocked at her shout and sudden aggressiveness, which I backed up only a second after she moved. As she swung her sword at one, I stepped forward to keep the others from catching her when she was open, lashing out with my axe to obliterate one of their skulls, my enhanced strength shining through. The third mutant recovered in time to try and bite my arm, but my one-strike shield lasted just long enough for me to shove them off, finishing them with a powerful stomp.

"Behind you!"

Tessa shouted, causing me to whirl around. Sure enough, three more displacers were running towards us, hissing while their barbed tails whipped around threateningly. They were a dozen or so feet away when I raised my hand.

"Light!" I called out, pausing for a second before closing my eyes and activating my stun glove. A split second later, a loud bang and an eye-searing flash of light filled the broken-down and ruined building. Even through my tightly closed eyes, and the effect focused mostly forward, the light had been bright enough, and the sound detonated loud enough that both my eyes and

ears hurt. The mutants had it much worse, though, as they yowled and screamed, two of them scrambling on the ground, unable to stand, while the third tried to run.

"Get the runner!" I called out, Tessa sprinting away to get the furthest mutant.

As she ran, I quickly dispatched the two writhing and hissing mutants, finishing just as she was returning, flicking the blood and gore off her sword before deactivating it and clipping it back to her belt.

"YOU ALRIGHT?" She asked loudly, clearly having caught more of the stun blast than me.

I gave her a thumbs up to confirm I was fine, before tapping my ear and pointing to her. She caught the gist of what I meant and only nodded in response. We stood there for a while, looking out into the fields, the slightly raised position letting us keep a lookout for anything coming towards us. After fifteen minutes, Tessa's hearing was mostly back, and the tension dissipated slightly.

"Why did we charge them?" I asked when she could finally understand me.

"Because there were too many of them," She explained. "The second group would have attacked us from behind, and things could have gotten much worse."

"Gotcha. Your arm okay?" I asked.

"Jostled it a few times, but nothing too bad," She assured me. "It's fine. Come on, let's get a closer look at the barn."

## Chapter 12

After the excitement of running from and fighting off the displacers, the challenge inside the barn ended up being relatively simple. After spending twenty minutes just sitting outside, trying to peer into the few dark and empty windows for any hints of what might be inside, we slowly made our way to the closest entrance inside. I pulled on my night vision goggles, pressing my face against the small glass window set into the doorway. The goggles activated with a wane of sound that I was almost certain was unnecessary, and suddenly, I could see into the interior darkness.

After only a minute of looking into the interior, I spotted the cache, a small green container hanging from the ceiling of the barn. The interior of the barn looked like a death trap, with hundreds of tools and farming equipment set up in what looked like the most dangerous



way possible, with sharp, jagged edges pointing out in ways that looked *intentionally* dangerous. I shook my head, not really wanting to deal with that.

"I see the reward, it's hanging from the ceiling," I said with a frown, pulling off the goggles and handing them to Tessa, who quickly put them on and took my place. "The whole place looks like a death trap."

"I don't see anything actively dangerous though," She added, and I nodded. "There's no way those tools were normally stored that way. Or have that many in one barn."

"Yeah, I agree. More interference."

"Well... If that's it, then let's get going. It will take a while to clear everything out of the way... or..."

Tessa pulled off her goggles and stood back, handing them to me while she was looking up at the roof. Without saying anything, she activated her jump boots and leaped into the air, dumping all the energy they had to clear the side of the barn easily, landing on the roof as if she had only jumped a step or two.

"Really?" I asked, looking up at her as she turned to look back. "What happened to me taking care of the dangerous stuff until you were healed? Or about me going first since I'm the tank?"

"It's fine," She insisted, waving away my concerns. "The roof looked strong enough, especially if it's just me. Look through the window and guide me to the cache."

I shook my head and looked back through the window, my goggles back on. We spent about five minutes getting her in the perfect position, Tessa pushing her sword through the roof to show where she was. When she was in the right position, she pulled her safety knife out and quickly cut a hole into the roof, reaching in and pulling the cache out with a shout of victory.

After dropping the box down to me, I caught her as well, both of us being careful of her arm, before we made our way back up to the wrecked house. I waved my arm over the box, which popped open to reveal...

"What is it?" Tessa asked, watching as I pulled out the hunk of metal, turning it over in my hands.

"I have no idea, so let's find out."

I quickly scanned the oddly shaped piece of metal, my implanted projector switching on and displaying a short description.

"It's an add-on for the light drone," I explained, quickly putting down my pack and unclipping the aforementioned drone.

I messed around for a moment before managing to get it attached correctly, holding the small puck of new material against the bottom of the drone. For a moment, its lights dimmed before pulsing back to full strength. I activated it, tapping a button on the new addition, the drone lighting up and rising off the ground. My projector activated and suddenly shifted from a map to an image of us. There were a few symbols in one of the corners that looked like a way to control the drone.

"It's a camera drone now," I explained, waving to the drone, the projected image of us mirroring our movement. "Kind of like a scout."

"That's useful... but can you turn off those lights?" She asked.

"No, it says they are necessary, but I'm guessing it's to prevent us from using it as a stealth drone against anything even remotely intelligent," I responded, shaking my head. "Not bad for a green crate, I think. It should come in handy against the vispers. Actually kinda makes me think they are fucking with the rewards too..."

We quickly packed up and left the crumbling house behind, neither of us comfortable sticking around the half dozen displacer corpses any longer than necessary. We quickly made our way back down the overgrown driveway before continuing down the same broken-up road we were following before.

Now that we had found all three of the first rewards, the weight of the final one, the purple stuck in a visper nest, started to sit much more heavily on our shoulders. I was internally nervous, having heard what kind of threat they were from the stories Tessa told me, so I could only imagine how she felt. The longer we traveled, the more time her hand spent on her pistol. Despite the fact that we were still two or three days away from them, she was clearly struggling.

The night after the barn cache, we hunkered down inside a secluded attic of a decent-sized house. Before that, though, we had dinner downstairs in the living room. Tessa only ate a bit more than me, and because of that we checked her arm, careful removing her brace first.

"It feels good," She said, slowly rotating her wrist, opening and closing her hand. "A few more days and I don't think I'll even notice it."

"Then that's our target," I responded, getting a nod in return. "Slowly make our way to the visper nest over the next two days."

"If I rebreak my arm, does that mean we will have to skip the vispers?" She asked, smirking slightly as I put her arm brace back on.

"Nope, it means you get to go first," I responded. "Try and keep them distracted enough for me to take some of them out, alright?"

She laughed, smacking my shoulder. When we started feeling tired we headed up into the attic. It was hot, damp, and cramped, but we both slept through it after a day of hiking and killing displacers.

The next two days were a familiar mix of scaving, traveling, and taking it slow. I wanted to give Tessa as much time as possible to heal before we attempted to tackle our second purple cache, but Tessa seemed to be struggling between being bored of taking it slow and easy, and desperately wanting it to take longer for us to get to our destination. By the end of the second day of travel, we were forty-five minutes or so away from the viper nest, and Tessa didn't feel any additional hunger, feeling full with just about the same portion as me.

"Alright, I need to take the speed serum," She said, pulling the gray self-injecting vial. "Let's hope it doesn't suck as much as last time."

It had been a few weeks since she took the first dose of speed serum, an enhancement that was incompatible with the strength serum as it modified a lot of the same things but in drastically different ways. The resulting experience looked comparable to my first dose of the strength serum. She had screamed and cursed, her muscles convulsing and shifting her body in ways that made her look possessed, even after she passed out from the pain.

Without much fanfare, she laid back on the floor of the basement we were staying in, taking a deep breath and injecting it into her leg.

"God, that itches so fucking much!" She cursed, clenching her fists hard to keep from attacking the injection sight in an attempt to scratch the spreading itch.

As I watched, I could see the moment the itch changed to pain, her face going slack for a moment before she spasmed and twisted.

"FffffffuuucccccKKKKkKK!" She screamed, trying and failing to contain her screams.

She convulsed on the floor as I watched, unable to do anything to help, for another minute before passing out. She was still convulsing, but now I didn't have to worry about her cracking a tooth from clenching too hard. About five or six minutes later, she woke up, slowly coming to and trying to sit up.

"Take it easy," I said, helping her sit and handing her the cooling canteen, watching as she drank from it deeply. "How are you feeling?"

"Lighter... Hungry."

I chuckled and handed her a can of beans I had opened, knowing very well how hungry she would be, both from her first serum and my own experience. She finished the bean, a can of vegetables, a can of chicken, and a bag of jerky, as well as a soda and the rest of our water from the cooling can.

I chuckled as she finally finished eating and drinking, falling back onto the floor, actually breathing heavily. I leaned back against a storage container, watching as she closed her eyes and fell asleep, soon joining her.

The next morning, after Tessa ate another large meal and I had a normal one, we left the protection of the basement and stepped out into the early morning sunshine. Tessa walked down the cracked stone steps of the house we had slept in, making her way to the road. She dropped her pack to the ground and gently put down her bow beside it before stepping out into the road. I watched as she crouched slightly, looking down the relatively intact stretch of asphalt. She took a few deep breaths and slowly released them, eyes focused down the street.

After a moment, she tensed and fired off down the street, moving faster than I had ever seen. Her legs were nearly a blur, carrying her across the ground like she was floating, compensating for every dip, crack, and hole on the road. When she reached the overgrown wreck of a car, she didn't slow down in the slightest. Instead, she chose to leap forward, using her enhanced reflexes to flip and land on the other side, sliding to a stop.

"Holy hell," I said, my eyes wide. "That was incredible!"

She smirked at my reaction, jogging back easily, slowing to a stop as she reached me. She flexed her arm, showing off new muscles that looked tight and compact, rather than the more powerhouse, gym rat look I was heading towards.

"How did it feel?"

"Natural, like I was born to move that fast," She admitted with a shrug. "I'm glad we found the reflex serum, though. I'm not sure if I could have handled going that fast without it, at least not off of a perfectly smooth surface like a track."

"I'm kinda jealous," I admitted. "I don't think I have ever seen anyone move that fast before."

"It was intense," She said with a smirk. "Now you know how I felt watching you show off your strength."

I laughed and nodded, leaning down to pick up her bow and pack, handing the latter to her, watching her put it on before passing her the first. Once she was ready we set off, following my map toward our target, the viper nest. Our goal today was to do some recon, as we both

wanted every advantage we could get before committing to the attack. I think, secretly, we also both hoped that we would see something worth canceling that attack over. I didn't think we would, but it was still a thought running through the back of my head.

After about twenty minutes, we were both starting to feel the rising tension, both of us staying as silent as possible, looking extra hard into every nook and cranny, expecting to see a shimmer or a glimpse of a giant snake.

We finally stopped a few blocks away from where the nest was supposed to be, climbing on top of one of the more intact nearby buildings. From there, I took out our newly improved drone, activating it with a tap. The drones' lights pulsed, though not bright enough to stand out on the relatively sunny day. I tapped on my implant, sticking my fingers through the control symbols in the bottom corner, steering the drone up and away from us.

It took a minute for me to get used to the controls, but soon I had the drone flying away from us to the large building that my map had claimed was where the purple reward was stashed. It was yet another large warehouse-like building, though this one stood apart significantly beyond that. Coils of mutated green and brown vines pushed out from every window, vent, and hole in the roof and walls. As I got closer, the drone still up nice and high to keep from being obvious, I started to circle the building, getting a good view of the structure.

As far as we could see, it seemed like the vines and branches of whatever mutated plant had exploded in growth were at least partially supporting the warehouse. This became even more apparent as we spun around to see the side opposite from our actual location, revealing that a large portion of the wall had collapsed outward.

With the overgrown interior exposed, we could just barely see into the building, with plenty of shadows and shade cast by the overgrowth, which had grown out of the collapsed wall and into a nearby park. It was all a mess of plant life, rubble, and whatever the hell the warehouse had been full of when it was still in use.

"Well... that looks welcoming," Tessa said sarcastically.

## Chapter 13

I slowly guided the drone down, moving it closer to the mess of mutated vines, tree limbs, rubble, and warehouse junk. Part of me wanted to try and spot one of the elusive visper snakes, but the main goal was to try and spot the purple cache.

The drone got closer and closer to the collapsed back wall of the warehouse, where the mass of plant life spilled out from the large opening. Eventually, I maneuvered the drone until it

was below the level of the building's surprisingly intact roof. Inside was the same mess of mutated plant life, but now that the drone was closer, it was much easier to see past. The interior of the large building was like its own mini forest ecosystem, built up around a massive central tree-like growth. I could see that the basement of the building had partially collapsed, the vines and branches of the growth curling and locking themselves around the chunks of concrete and rebar that the collapse exposed.

"There, stop it there," Tessa said, leaning more over my shoulder to see the map. "Look."

I squinted and looked where she was pointing, cursing when I realized what she had spotted. The large central growth started, like a tree, wide by its base, vines, and roots forming a squat foundation that led up to a tall trunk before branching outwards into the ceiling, weaving between the metal structures that supported the roof. There, just barely poking out from in between thick branches, nestled in the crown, was a small glint of purple.

"Fuck... that is not going to be easy to get out," I said, flying the drone around to get a better view.

As the drone went deeper into the dark interior, its lights became more and more obvious, to the point that you could just barely make out the slow pulsing lights on the trunk of the growth. I ignored it, wanting to get a better look at the reward. Just before I could see any deeper into the crown of a massive mutated plant, I caught a glint of something. Two somethings.

"Holy hell..." I said, pulling the drone back as a shimmering form slid around inside the crown, two glowing yellow eyes the size of baseballs.

I quickly maneuvered the drone backward, hopefully out of the vispers range, stopping when I was sure the drone was safe.

"Told you they were big," Tessa said breathlessly, conflicted about being right but wishing she had been wrong.

"... We need to know how many there are..." I said, looking over at my partner in this game. "Might be a bad idea to disturb them though."

"Do it. If there are more than a few, it doesn't matter because we aren't doing it," She responded. "I don't care how much more challenging stuff is gonna get."

"Alright... count the eyes, I guess," I said with a nod before focusing on the controls.

With a few touches and a swipe, I activated the drone's lights, cranking them up and turning them onto a long strobe. Instantly the warehouse lit up, before going dark again, over and over again. Within seconds two more shimmering forms started to move, four more glowing

yellow orbs. I quickly flew around the central growth, scanning the interior as best I could before zipping the drone out into the sunlight.

"I counted three," I said as I piloted the drone back to us.

"I saw the same," Tessa confirmed. "Fewer than I expected."

"... They are fucking massive," I said, shaking my head. "With the crown as dense and tight as it was and how high up it was, there is no way we would be able to do a smash and grab. We are going to have to kill all three of them."

"Of course we are!" Tessa responded. "Did you really think we would be able to sneak in? Or run in and not get eaten?"

"No, doesn't mean it wasn't an option," I answered, shaking my head. "Alright, we know what to expect, we have a head count. All that's left is to make a plan."

Tessa was slow to participate, but gradually we gathered steam, trying to come up with the best way to clear the viper nest without getting ourselves killed. We ended up leaving our spot and backing away from the nest, traveling for about twenty minutes before starting to do some scaving. Tessa was still extra hungry from her change, so we needed a bunch of extra food, enough for her to have an extra meal for both dinner and breakfast, as well as a snack.

We cleared out two dozen buildings, planning when we were inside and silently moving when we were heading to our next target. Eventually, once we had found enough food, we set up a temporary shelter in a finished basement, blocking the interior access as usual.

"I think our best bet is to bait them out, like we did with the tuskers," I suggested.

"Are you volunteering to be bait?" She asked incredulously, her eyes going wide when I nodded. "Are you insane?"

"Tessa, I get that these things are scary. I almost had an accident when the first one started moving!" I admitted, the native survivor scoffing. "But these things can't be invincible. We killed that worm, didn't we? Can you imagine these being much more difficult?"

"There are three of them," She pointed out.

"And they don't have armor plating," I fired back. "I get that you have been hearing stories about these things for a long time, but they are just another mutant. Scary, dangerous ones, but mutants nonetheless. We *can* kill them."

She leaned back in her seat, a dusty old couch that was the only seat not moldy in this basement. After a moment, she let out a long breath, shaking her head.

"Alright, you might have a point," She finally admitted. "So what's your plan?"

"My plan is we draw them out. Fighting them in that warehouse is a death sentence," I admitted with a shrug, Tessa looking smug for a moment before she realized what she was being smug about. "I draw them out, you hit them with arrows, and then I can finish them off. Simple but effective."

"How are you only going to get one?"

"By being careful, maybe shooting them?" I suggested. "If there was ever a situation to use our guns, this is it."

"Not sure they will do much to them unless you get lucky," Tessa responded. "Lots of muscle to get through."

We continued to talk for the rest of the day, debating strategies and ideas until we eventually had dinner and turned in for the night. The next morning, we made our way back to the same rooftop we had used the drone from. We went over our plan again before we took off anything that we wouldn't need, leaving it all in a pile, hidden from prying eyes. When we were done, we both paused.

"You ready?"

"Of course I'm not fucking ready, Leon; I'm about to attack something my dad used to talk about as a scary story around a campfire!" She said, slapping my shoulder. "But I'm doing it anyway."

"We can handle it, Tessa," I said, reaching out and patting her shoulder. "C'mon, doing this in the morning might give us an advantage."

As I led the way off of the roof, she grumbled something about her being the expert in this world. I ignored it, leading the way until, eventually, she caught up. I looked over at her as she did, getting a nod and a serious look in return.

We made our way closer and closer to the large building, slowing down considerably as we did. We were constantly looking around, doing our best to keep our eyes peeled for massive, color-shifting snakes. From what we could tell, the feed from the drone had made it clear that the key to spotting the mutant snakes when they were blended in was to keep moving. They shifted their colors for specific directions, making their camo dependent on where you were looking from, resulting in an odd look once you were looking from a different angle or position.

Or it was just some weird interference with the feed, and we were banking on a figment of a bad connection.



Eventually, after creeping around for five minutes, we reached the building we had picked out during our planning. It was in a great position, with one side running parallel to the mostly collapsed face of the large, overgrown building. It wasn't as stable as we hoped, but it was strong enough to hold just Tessa.

We shared a look before she jumped up the side of the building, starting by climbing up onto a dumpster and then using her boots to jump the rest. For a long moment, I stood there, looking up at where she had disappeared. I could feel my hands shaking a bit, so I took a deep breath and let it out, tightening my grip on my axe.

I walked out past the building, giving Tessa a thumbs up before heading straight for the large warehouse, following the road. As I got closer, I slowed down again, my head on a swivel as I tried to watch everything at once. My first step onto the rubble from the collapsed wall sent the sound of broken glass being crushed echoing through the building. I resisted the urge to curse, taking another step, then another. I turned to look inside the hole in the wall, seeing the overgrown mini forest with my own eyes for the first time. I looked down for a split second, finding a good place for me to put my feet, only to look back up and see two glowing yellow eyes, only a dozen or so feet from me.

I leaped backward just in time to dodge the massive snake's first attack, the chameleon snake mutant bursting out of the warehouse. It recovered from its lunge quickly, dipping and diving back and forth as I scrambled to stand. I cursed loudly as I turned to run, jumping to the side to dodge another attack.

The snake was massive, its head a good foot and a half long, its scales shifting color wildly as it struck out again and again, just barely missing each time, but keeping me from escaping to run back towards Tessa. With an angry shout, I stopped dodging, letting its massive head slam into me, bringing my axe up to slam into its side at the same time. My hit kept him from biting me, but the angry lizard still slammed its head into my chest, the blow lifting me off of my feet and throwing me backward.

I tumbled and rolled on the ground, coming to a stop a full ten feet away from the snake, which was now bleeding from its side. It raised its head, eyes locked on me as it swung from side to side. Before it could attack again, and despite the fact that I could hardly breathe after getting the air knocked out of me, I turned and ran. I could hear the mutant snake hissing and lunging after me, shifting rubble and glass. I could hear it getting closer, almost catching up to me, when I heard the familiar sound of Tessa firing her bow. I turned in time to see an arrow slammed into the snake's neck, causing it to rear back and roil its tail and midsection. Its tail slapped against a wrecked car, smashing its hood and shifting it a full foot.

Before it could recover, Tessa tried to shoot it again, but its movement was too wild and the arrow narrowly missed. Seeing an opportunity I turned and charged, narrowly dodging a wide swinging tail to slam my axe head into its midsection, hacking deeply into its body. I

managed to swing again, cutting it even deeper before I had to duck and roll clear of it, lunging at me again. It hissed and immediately lunged again, not giving me a moment to breathe, slamming its head against me and wrapping its jaws around my left arm, trying to sink its barbed teeth into me. Thankfully, though plenty of them managed to penetrate through my jacket, armor, and skin, the snake didn't seem able to chew on me.

With a shout of anger and pain, I raised my axe, hiking my grip upwards towards the axe head and slamming it down, destroying a large yellow eye. I hit it over and over again, even as it tried to wrap itself around me, its midsection and tail twitching and encircling me. I could feel it give one last full body shake when my axe cut deep enough to sink into its brain, the coils going limp. I screamed as its head fell to the ground, the movement tearing its teeth from my muscles and skin.

"Leon! Look out!" Tessa shouted, getting my attention just in time to look up and see a second mutant snake slam into me, wrapping its powerful jaws around my right leg.

I cursed and shouted as the second mutant knocked me completely off of my feet, immediately starting where its fellow had left off, trying its best to wrap itself around me, trying to constrict and bind me. I hacked at it, managing to hit its neck and a bit lower before my axe was knocked from my hands. I struggled against it as its thick, massive body wrapped around me, overpowering even my enhanced strength. I punched and kicked at it until I couldn't move, barely able to tilt my head and see two arrows embedded in its side, a third soon joining it.

But it just kept wrapping me up.

I could feel the mutant snake begin to crush me as I struggled desperately, my body being squeezed tighter and tighter, my bones and joints screaming as they endured more and more pressure, shifting in ways that weren't intended. Suddenly, I heard Tessa shout, and the snake shifted in surprise, the movement dragging me around until I was looking upward, looking up at the clear blue sky, stars starting to dance in my vision. As I watched, my body feeling like it was about to shatter, Tessa leaped from the roof, screaming a challenge as her sword extended out, already sparking with electric energy.

She was beautiful.

The snake shifted again, tearing its teeth from my leg as it swung around to see who was screaming at it, just in time for Tessa to plunge her sword into its skull, the razor-sharp blade cutting clean through. Her momentum carried her downward, and her sword followed with her, carving a deep, brutal cut down its body, stopping when she slammed into the ground, rolling to absorb the impact.

The visper fell to the ground, its head slamming along the hood of a truck, blood and gore pouring out across the ruined vehicle, the massive mutant dead before it even impacted.

## Chapter 14

Tessa was struggling to her feet, only to give up and crawl, making her way to me, carving into the still quivering body of the snake, finally freeing me. I gasped when the last coil was cut from my chest, breathing deeply as the strength slowly returned to my body.

"Fuck, are you okay?" She asked, leaning over me, still hacking at the visper corpse. "C'mon, you need to be okay."

"I'm.... okay!" I managed to gasp out, kicking off the final bits of mutant lizard. "Thank you."

"Yeah... you'd do the same for me," She responded, and I nodded because, of course, I would. "Can you stand?"

I nodded and stood up, accepting a hand and managing to get myself up on my feet. I walked on weak legs to where my axe had ended up, picking it up and standing back up.

"I say we take a five-minute break," I suggested. "Maybe-"

"Sorry, Leon, we don't have that kind of time," She responded, cutting me off, the tone of her voice prompting me to turn and look.

Sure enough, slowly slithering out of the warehouse was the third snake, its shimmering body useless as it moved. It was significantly larger than the first two, nearly double in all dimensions, the rubble crumpling under its large size. Its darting movements froze when it laid its yellow eyes on us.

"Fuck."

As if my curse set it off, the gigantic mutant snake slithered forward faster than I thought a living creature could move. Its massive length, maybe forty feet, shoved a car to the side before crushing another one as it slid over it, hardly even slowing. Seeing that Tessa was closer to it than me, I rushed forward, my powerful lumbering strides letting me pass her and rush the massive mutant before it could reach her.

The mutant didn't let me approach idly, though. The second I got within range, it struck, lunging forward and attempting to snap me up in its monstrous jaws. I hopped to the left, dodging with such a small margin of error that I could count its barbed, finger-length teeth. As it tried to recover from its strike, I slammed my axe down into its back, cutting deep into its body, my ace sinking to the handle.

The monstrous mutant whirled around on me, the movement almost tearing the axe from my grip, jerking me forward hard enough to make me stumble. I braced myself for its attack, only for it to hiss and spit, continuing to move and slither. I turned to see Tessa, her sword dripping with blood, a long but unfortunate shallow cut along its lower neck. The speed-focused survivor dove behind a car, rolling the last few feet just in time to dodge the snake's tail as it tried to slap out at her.

I rushed forward again, seeing a momentary opening thanks to Tessa's distraction. I wound up and jumped off of a piece of rubble, swinging my axe in a wide downward strike, slamming down into the massive visper's midsection. I tried to yank my axe out and hack at it again, but it squirmed and rolled, whipping its body around, smashing into another car as it did.

Tessa had recovered by now, standing up from behind the car, holding her sword out in front of herself. Both of us were watching the visper closely, waiting for it to make a move, its head shifting side to side, its tongue flickering out to taste the air. Blood dripped down its body, leaking from where we had hacked and slashed at it. Despite its multiple wounds, however, it did not act wounded.

Suddenly, the massive creature whirled to focus on me. It lunged, its horrifically large jaws trying to clamp down on me. This time, however, it was ready for my dodge, using its powerful musculature to whip around against me the second I dodged, driving me backward and slamming me into a truck. I could feel my shield flicker as it hit me, meaning when my back smacked into the rusted vehicle hard enough to leave me-sized dent in the side, I took the entire blow.

I stumbled forward, my body failing for a moment, collapsing down to one knee, regardless of what I was facing. I looked up to see Tessa leaping over her cover, slashing her sword against the massive visper's lower neck, a pop of energy going off as she discharged another blast of electricity into its body. The muscles around her attack contracted, causing the snake's head to jerk back before it could finish me off. It flopped down onto its back for a moment, coiling around in pain, before whipping its tail out at us.

Tessa, who had continued to run to me after hitting the visper, didn't see the attack coming, so I half collapsed, half jumped forward, dropping my axe in my attempt to pull her down. The snake's powerful tail whipped past over us, almost taking my head off in the process. Tessa scrambled to stand again, helping me to my feet.

"We aren't really hurting it!" She shouted.

"Stab, not slash!" I shouted back, pushing her away to let the monster's tail slam down between us.

Tessa stumbled from my shove but recovered, running away from me, putting a burnt-out car husk between her and the snake. While she did, I pulled out my pistol and took aim, shooting at the mutant snake's head. The gunshot echoed through the street, and a spurt of blood marked the bullet's impact, punching into the flesh on the top of its head.

Between the sound and the pain from the bullet, I had the snake's full attention, and it rushed to attack me. It slithered across the broken street faster than I could run, so I didn't even bother. I took aim and shot again, putting two more bullets into its neck and one in its head while it lunged out to bite. Before it could pull back, I held out my hand and fired off my stun glove, a massive flash of light and an explosive bang going off inches from its eyes.

The cut-up, shot, and bleeding snake reared back, hissing and spitting loud enough that it almost sounded like screaming and shouting. I stumbled away, half stunned and blinded, barely able to watch as Tessa jumped off the hood of a car and stabbed her sword into the side of the snake. Her attack pushed deep into the massive mutant, only intensifying its wild and angry reaction to my attempt to stun it. I slid my pistol back into my holster, grabbed my axe off the ground, and rushed to help her, slamming my axe several times into the massive monster's neck.

Feeling its death looming closer as Tessa pulled her sword out and prepared for another stab, the monster tried to grab her, trying wrapping its tail around her, only for her to jump out at the last second. She must have been using her jump boots because she easily cleared four feet, only for the snake's tail to whip up and trip, trying to grab her leg. She fell backward, landing on her behind, stunned by the fall for just a moment. Seeing its opportunity, the mutant abomination jabbed its head forward, trying to snag her with its teeth.

Without thinking I was there, my axe raised horizontally, jammed into the joint of its jaws, sliding backward as my enhanced muscles shook under the strain of holding it back. It gnawed on the axe handle, managing to jab my arms and hands several times with its barbed teeth, tearing off chunks of flesh.

Suddenly, its jaw unhinged, extending the reach of its jaws significantly. It opened wide to chomp on me...

Only for Tessa to jab her sword into its eye, throwing her whole weight into the stab. It slid deep into its skull, stopping for a fraction of a second before puncturing the orbital socket and driving almost all the way up to the hilt.

The mutant snake heaved itself away from us, wildly spasming. Both our weapons were torn from our hands, mine sent along the ground while Tessa's stayed embedded in the mutant's skull. The monstrosity was oddly quiet, the shifting rubble and debris the only sound as it writhed and shook through its death throes. After almost half a minute of twitching and spasming, the monster finally went still.

The road was silent, and so were we, both of us waiting, holding our breath, for the next shoe to drop. After a full minute, both of us shared a look.

She looked like she had been put through the wringer, bleeding from scraps on her face, her eye already looking a bit swollen. How she got hit there, I don't know. After a few seconds, she walked to the nearest car wreck before nearly collapsing, leaning back against it. After a moment, I limped over to join her, stepping over one of the smaller snake corpses to do so.

We sat there quietly for a few minutes, both of us slowly recovering.

"We did it," Tessa eventually said, shaking her head in shock. "I can't believe we fucking did it."

"We did," I responded, nodding slowly. "We fucking did."

"See?" Tessa said, her breathing slowly returning to normal. "I told you we could do it. All that worrying for nothing."

I turned to look at her, my partner in this crazy experience slowly turning to look at me. I raised my eyebrow, and for a second, we were quiet before her composure broke, a giggle escaping her mouth. Soon we were both laughing, leaning on each other as we bled off the many layers of tension and anxiety that we had both built up over the last week or so. If both our laughing got slightly hysterical a few times, neither of us commented on it.

It took a while for us to recover fully, both from the fight and our subsequent laughter-filled breakdown. When we finally did, or at least enough for us to move around and think, I stood up and started looking for my axe. Eventually, I found it inside one of the stores that dotted the street, having been thrown there during the last part of the struggle. After that, I helped Tessa pull her sword from the mutant's corpse, the sharp blade firmly stuck inside its skull. After a moment of staring at the massive mutant I pulled out my knife, cutting a large chunk of its flesh from its long body.

"Are you gonna eat that?" Tessa asked incredulously.

"It almost ate me," I responded with a shrug. "I'm gonna damn well try."

After a short conversation, we decided to go back and retrieve our stuff before making our way into the massive, mutated jungle-filled warehouse. It would be the perfect place to sleep for the night, even with the corpses outside. Any other mutants in the area knew better than to get near the nest.

After thoroughly checking the area for any more vispers, Tessa started trying to climb the central growth while I cleared out a place for us to set up camp. After about ten minutes of

climbing on her part and, at the same time, clearing out a space near the base of the growth and starting a small fire using the wood and vines, we had both finished our tasks.

The crate was the size of a small storage trunk, and after I cut the snake meat up and hung it over a spit, I opened it with a wave of my arm. The crate unsealed with a short hiss, and Tessa eagerly opened it up.

Inside the cache were two objects, each set into the usual protective foam. In between both of them was a small paper card with writing on it. I carefully picked up the card, checking both sides before reading it to Tessa.

"Good Luck, Love Ilbryen." I read out loud, crumpling up the paper and throwing it into the fire. "Looks like they are messing with rewards too."

"Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?" Tessa asked.

"I don't know. Ask again in a few minutes."

## Chapter 15

After a few seconds of looking into the trunk's interior, Tessa reached in and grabbed the reward that was obviously intended for her. It was a quiver, filled with about twenty-five arrows and made from some sort of synthetic, leather-like material. She tilted it back and forth to examine it from every angle before passing it to me to scan.

"It's an enhanced quiver and arrows," I explained. "The arrows will fly straight for longer, are armor piercing, and are nearly indestructible. The quiver will even guide you to any that you lose, and arrows won't fall out unless you're touching them."

"How much armor are we talking about?" She asked, accepting the reward back.

"I don't think you gonna have to worry about armor again," I replied. "Least not here."

She nodded and looked down at the quiver, flipping it upside down and shaking it. When no arrows fell out, she flipped it right side up before pulling one single arrow out to examine. While she was doing that, I reached down and pulled out the portion of the reward that was very obviously meant for me.

It was a normal-sized hatchet, with a belt clip already attached to it. I pulled the hatchet from the clip, turning it over in my hands. The handle was deep red wood, with a leather grip seamlessly fixed around the base. The axe head itself had a vaguely Celtic design carved into it, with twisting lines that were highlighted by a gold inlay. It looked like an art piece, not a tool.

By now, Tessa had put her arrow away and was now watching me, clearly waiting for me to scan it, so I ran the axe by my implant. The description popped up as usual, and I spent a few minutes reading it, already smirking by about the halfway mark. When I closed it, Tessa looked at me impatiently.

"Well? What does it do?"

I answered by gripping the last inch of the hatchet, spinning it counterclockwise, a dial clicking as I did. Suddenly, when the dial clicked into place, the axe started to transform in a similar way to how Tessa's sword did. It slowly shifted bigger and bigger until it was the length of my normal axe, the head looking a bit bigger and meaner, as if whoever made it was told to take a fire axe and make it look a bit more like a weapon. The whole front end of the axe was bigger, drawn out further and taller, the edge almost three inches taller. The spike in the back was heftier too, drawn out to a sharper point while still looking sturdy. The head had a similar detailing and inlay as the hatchet.

"Damn..." Tessa said, looking at my new weapon with wide eyes. "Does it do anything else?"

"It hits better," I explained, shrugging when she gave me a skeptical look. "I don't know what it means either, but that's what the description said. I don't need to sharpen it either. Oh, and the belt loop will help me find it like your quiver does."

I turned the bottom inch of the axe, the weapon slowly shrinking to its smaller hatchet form. I spent a few minutes hooking the loop to my belt before clipping the hatchet back to the belt hook, testing the release a few times until I had the action memorized and smoothed out.

"One, that was cool as hell," Tessa said before smirking. "Two... Your snake meat is burning."

I turned to look at my impromptu spit, cursing as I saw she was right. She laughed as I quickly started turning the meat, sitting down to watch it more closely. She sat down beside me after a few seconds, both of us enjoying the pause despite being sore and battered.

The meat took a while to cook, but now that I was paying attention to it, it never got that close to burning again. While it was cooking, Tessa and I tried out our rewards. I found a sizable vine that was growing along the central growth of the mini-ecosystem that had developed inside this warehouse and took several whacks at it with my old axe. It ended up taking five chops to carve through it, while the new axe, which I used next, only took one.

Tessa took a few shots with her new arrows, also aiming at a vine ran along the tree trunk. The arrow slammed into the side of the tree, burying itself halfway into the tree, all the way through the vine.



"Holy hell... You're gonna have a hard time getting those out of some stuff," I pointed out. "Imagine one of those arrows hitting one of the purple worm's armored plates."

"You said they were nearly indestructible, right?" She asked, and I nodded in response, watching as she walked up to the arrow and worked it free, violently wiggling it side to side before it finally released. "Should make it easier to retrieve. That would have just ruined a normal one."

"Right. Well... Thanks for not screwing us over, Ilbryen," I said, looking up and around. "I'll buy you a beer when we get back."

Tessa scoffed and laughed at my joke, sliding the arrow back into her quiver as we walked back to the makeshift camp. I turned the spit again, the meat starting to cook through. Tessa and I talked about the fight as we waited for it to be done.

"I still can't believe you jumped off of the roof," I said with a smirk. "You could have broken your legs!"

"Yeah, but you looked like you were about to pop!" She responded, shaking her head. "I didn't have time to climb down, and I was worried I would hit you if I shot it with an arrow and missed. And that's nothing, you jumped in front of the big one!"

"You didn't have time to dodge," I explained with a shrug. "I'm the tank, it's my job."

"Yeah, until it eats you 'cause it's a massive snake and could have overpowered you!" She shot back, shaking her head. "You're crazy. Thank you."

"Any time. You did the same for me," I responded, repeating what she had said earlier.

She smiled and nodded, leaning back against a massive root, looking around the warehouse as we listened to the meat spit and sizzle from the heat of the fire. When we finally decided that the meat was properly cooked, I pulled it off the spit, my stun gloves insulating me enough to hold it while we both cut chunks off and ate them.

"That... It's good but very different from the tusker meat," Tessa said, swallowing a big chunk. "Kinda like a pigeon."

"I was gonna say chicken, but that tracks," I said, nodding in agreement. "Kinda like a cross between fish and chicken,"

"I've had river fish before, but I've never had chicken," Tessa responded, cutting off another chunk. "It's good. Miles better than room temperature beans and vegetable mix."

I chuckled and took another cut, pulling out a large bone before putting it into my mouth. We ate silently for the most part, finishing the hot meat in record time. When we were done, I grabbed two cans of beans and opened them both, resting them next to the fire to heat up. It didn't take long, though Tessa had to eat hers with her jacket sleeve wrapped around it to keep from burning herself.

We relaxed and recovered, sitting together by the fire, surrounded by green mutant forest growth, as the outside light dimmed, the sun setting slowly. We slid closer to the fire as the night got surprisingly cold, adding more fuel to keep us warm.

"So, tomorrow, we will pick up the pace," Tessa said, looking at me seriously. "We have been relaxing, letting me recover for way too long. My arm is fine, and the bumps and scrapes we got today should be fine soon, too."

I simply nodded, agreeing with her, even if I wasn't looking forward to it. As much as I knew we needed to move, taking it easy to buy time had been nice. Well, it had made everything more tolerable, at least. I shifted to the side and leaned back, resting my head on my pack as I laid down perpendicular to the fire. I groaned as I did, my body still feeling very sore from almost being squeezed to death. I moved around a bit before ending up on my back, looking up at the vein-covered roof.

"You going to sleep?" Tessa asked after a minute of me lying there silently.

"Yeah, I'm sore, and we should get up early tomorrow," I responded, closing my eyes.

"... it's cold."

I almost opened my mouth to say that she should put more wood on the fire when my mind managed to work out the weird tone she was using. I turned my head to look at her, finding her looking very intently away from me, out through the hole in the far warehouse wall. I slid to the side, making more room between me and the fire. She turned to see me move and, without prompting, slid in beside me. She put her head on my chest, half laying on top of me, and I pulled off my coat, covering the both of us as best I could.

Silently, we laid together, keeping warm and eventually drifting off to sleep.

The following morning, we woke up quickly, polishing off all of our scavenged food, dipping into the last bits of the food I traded for back at Bakersfield. After we ate, we set about a grim task. While exploring the previous day, Tessa and I stumbled into a clutch of about a half dozen eggs, each the size of a large loaf of bread. They were located in an uncollapsed section of the building's basement, laid in a low area of mud, surrounded by signs of their parents having been around.

With a grimace I hacked them open with my axe, feeling oddly guilty about it, especially when we could see a half-formed visper baby inside each one. Still, it needed to be done; they were just too fucking dangerous.

Once we were done, we headed back up to our camp, quickly packing up and heading out, leaving the overgrown warehouse behind. Before we started out on the next leg of our journey, though, I stopped Tessa with a hand on her shoulder.

"Hold on a second," I said, turning and heading back towards the street where we had fought the vispers.

"What's up?" She asked, following behind me.

"Just need to do something before we leave."

I made my way to the massive visper corpse, the final one we killed. Unsurprisingly, it was just as we left it, in a pool of its own blood. I got closer to the head and, with a shoving kick, pushed it into a good position, walking around it to stand directly in front of it. After a moment of pause, I took my axe, the old one, the one that had seen me through up to this point, and slammed it down into its head, sinking deep into the dead mutant and wedging it into its skull. I smirked and released the axe, which stayed standing with its blade firmly stuck.

"What was that for?" Tessa asked as I walked around the massive mutant to get back to her.

"When I found the axe, it was stuck in a hiver skull," I explained, still smirking. "Figured it deserved to get the same kind of send-off."

"Hell of a step up," She said with a laugh. "From hiver to visper."

"Mhmm. You ready?"

"Just waiting on you."

I nodded, and together we walked away, following a cracked and pitted road. When we got to the outskirts of the major concentration of buildings that the visper nest had sat at the edge of, we stopped to check the map.

"Alright, so we have a bit of traveling before we make it to the main path that will eventually lead to the gold point," I said, even though Tessa was looking over my shoulder at the map. "We could probably make it today if we pushed..."

"We probably should," Tessa responded, though not sounding particularly happy about it. "We ran down a lot of our spare time waiting for my arm to heal. We need to make up for it while we can, in case something happens."

"Yeah... fine," I reluctantly agreed."

"I was also thinking..." Tessa started to say, before leaning in and whispering quietly. "What if we didn't follow the path? Avoid all their setup challenges?"

"I... Well, it's not a bad idea, but I don't think it would work. We are heading out on a multiple-week-long trip," I pointed out with a wince. "We might skip one if we are fortunate, but they would adjust before we could skip any more. Plus, I'm not sure whispering is gonna help much."

"Alright then... straight through head on it is," She reluctantly said before pulling away and walking on the forward path. "Might as well get started."

I nodded and followed behind her, eyes on the path ahead.

## Chapter 16

We had been traveling for a day and a half, making up for some of our lost time, when Tessa had a random question.

"So... who exactly is watching us?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "People from my world."

"Yeah... but are they watching through the TV?" She asked. "I know sports and stuff would come through the TV live, so are we on TV all the time?"

"Not... Really?" I answered, trying to think of how to clarify it despite the fact that she wouldn't have a frame of reference for a lot of the specifics. "So, do you know what the internet is?"

"I've heard it was like the radio but with everyone talking at once," She said. "Just kind of sounds chaotic to me."

"It was a lot more organized than that. Imagine a TV, but not only could you watch stuff, you could access a lot of information and even post your own information, like sharing images or messaging people. Anyway, it's completely replaced TV. We just call it media now."

"Okay... And that's where people are watching us?"

"Yeah, that and probably a lot of viewers on chips," I respond. "A tiny cellphone

We were silent for a while, crossing through a massive pile-up on a long stretch of road. It was tense being between towns like this, but according to the map, we really didn't have a choice. We could only hope to find somewhere to take cover on the way.

"How many people do you think are watching us?"

"Probably a good amount," I guessed, stopping to look into the woods before jogging to catch up. "The fact that they invited you and went through the expense of setting up all the shit we are about to go through, they must be making some money off of us."

"So... like a couple thousand?"

"Thousand?" I asked, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. "No, probably a lot more than that. Tens of thousands at least. Maybe even a few hundred thousand."

"That's... a lot of people," Tessa said after a long lull in the conversation. "I can't even imagine a thousand..."

"Earth's population is ten billion, then there are three billion living in the lunar cities," I explained, Tessa turning to look at me with wide eyes. "I think Mars was getting close to seven hundred and fifty thousand last I heard."

"That's insane!" Tessa responded in shock, stopping to turn and stare at me openly. "How? That's... can't...that many people..."

"Probably. For all I know, they are running this a loss to earn the ins and outs about how to set this all up," I guessed with a shrug. "I mean, some of the challenges around caches are easy, and other times they are way too difficult. I just hope they listen to my advice when we get back."

"... like what?" She asked after a long, long pause. "Sorry, I'm still wrapping my mind around billions. I... don't really know how much that is. I know it's next after a million... but past that?"

"Yeah, to be fair, I don't have a whole lot of context for a billion past the population," I admitted with a shrug.

We were quiet for a while, Tessa wrestling with a number that her planet hadn't seen in a long time. Eventually, she must have been satisfied or given up.

"What are you gonna tell them when you get back?" She asked as we climbed up and over an overturned truck trailer.

"Well... I should probably keep them to myself for now," I said. "Probably not something to talk about when we are being watched."

"Huh... I was gonna share mine, but you're probably right. I wouldn't want to ruin the surprises."

I chuckled, and we continued walking, continuing to make headway on the long, car-stuffed roadway. I tried very hard not to think about how horrible it must have been to be stuck in a jam like this, knowing behind you was probably a death sentence.

After about another fifteen minutes of walking, Tessa slowed down, stopping as she walked sideways between two cars that had stopped too close together. She concentrated for a moment, looking around in confusion.

"What's going-"

"Ssshhh!" She said, still looking around, slowly pulling out her sword, clicking it active, the blade extending from the handle. "I can hear something."

I pulled out my hatchet, activating it quickly into its full axe form, looking around as well. Sure enough, as I focused, I could hear a slight humming sound, but it was far too subtle for me to figure out where it was coming from.

"I hear it," I said. "Where is it coming from?"

"I don't know, but... it kinda sounds like your drone," She responded.

Before I could say anything, a familiar sound cracked over us, the sound of a zap round whizzing over us, slapping into one of the cars between Tessa and me.

"Get down!" I called out, diving between two cars, watching Tessa do the same.

A dozen zap rounds passed through where both of us had just been standing, sending sparks and putting dents in whatever cars they flew past us. The barrage continued as if they were trying to find a gap in our cover. After five seconds, a quartet of combat drones flew past, one of them dropping a canister between the both of us.

"Fuck!" I said, jumping and crawling to the canister, slapping it under one of the rusted-out wrecks that Tessa was hiding next to.

The flashbang had just disappeared under the wreck when it went off, sending out a ridiculously bright flash and a massive bang. However, the wreck blocked most of the blast, meaning we only felt a minor ringing in our ears.

"What the hell are those?!" Tessa asked as we crawled away from the truck, which was smoking enough that I assumed something had caught fire from the flashbang.

"Drones!" I shouted back over the continued shooting. "First of the enhanced challenges, probably!"

Tessa let out a long, grumbling series of curses aimed at whoever came up with this idea. Eventually, our crawling led us to an overturned truck, both of us leaning back against exposed underworkings.

"Same plan as before!" I called out, touching Tessa's mouth to keep her from commenting. "They can hear and adapt! You know what I mean?"

She nodded, chewing her lip, and unclipped her bow while I shrugged off my pack. Somewhere along the way we had transferred most of the stuff we had left to my pack. Since I was the strong tank, it made sense to keep Tessa free to move around, plus her pack got in the way of her new quiver.

After a moment of preparation, we shared a nod, and I jumped out of cover, carrying my axe in one hand and my pistol in the other. I shot once, managing to just barely wing the lead drone, catching all of their attention at once. I turned and ran, making sure that they could still see me as I juked in between cars, just barely avoiding the zap rounds they were unloading at me. I was nowhere near as fast as Tessa, but my enhanced strength let me do a long, bounding stride that definitely pushed to the upper limits of human speed.

I cursed as a zap round bounced off my shield, my one and only defense taken down. It would be staying down, too, as stopping something like a zap round, even if it was meant to be "non-lethal," would keep it down for a while. I slide down lower behind a car, the drones zipping over me, flinging themselves into a sharp turn to face me again. I cursed and looked around, holstering my pistol before reaching out and grabbing a rusted and hanging car door, grunting as I yanked it off of the car.

"Fuck fuck fuck please don't go through," I said as I held my impromptu shield up, crouching slightly behind it, feeling a tingle of electricity as a few dozen zap rounds slammed into it, but failed to go through. "Yes!"

I held the shield up again, making sure to keep it between me and the drones. Suddenly, one of them lurched and bobbed slightly before it fell from the sky, slamming into the windshield of a large van and embedded itself in the previously intact safety glass. Sparks flew out from a singular hole, highlighting the arrow sticking out of the side. I looked down the road to see Tessa

standing on the side of the rolled-over truck, the door open beside her. Immediately, the drones whirled around, which pulled the attention off me but meant Tessa was now in danger.

The drones opened fire on the skilled archer, who had clearly seen the danger coming because she jumped down into the wrecked truck and disappeared into the cab. The drones didn't slow down, buzzing the vehicle-packed road as they peppered the bottom of the truck cab, sparks flying everywhere. I cursed, hoping that the truck bottom was enough to keep Tessa safe, and ran after them, sliding to a stop when they flew up higher into the sky before diving back down on me, peppering the car door with the special ammunition. I cursed and held up the car door, gritting my teeth as I weathered the barrage.

Suddenly, I heard the familiar whipping sound of Tessa firing an arrow, and I looked up through the empty window space to see one of the drones falling out of the sky towards me, the rest of them following it down. I dropped my shield and dove out of the way, the relatively large drone smashing into the ground just about where I had been standing. The remaining two drones got down just as low, probably trying to avoid Tessa by getting as low as possible. Unfortunately for them, I could be just as deadly.

I jumped up onto a car hood before jumping again and swinging my axe downward, flinging myself surprisingly high with my enhanced strength. I slammed my new shiny axe deep into one of the drones, its active lights immediately going dark as we both fell back to the ground. I hit the ground and rolled, not exactly gracefully, but I managed to avoid hurting myself. Unfortunately, I could feel how sloppy it was and how open I was for the last remaining drone to attack. I tried to dive out of the way again, scrambling to hide behind a nearby van. Surprisingly, I made it, the drone not firing at me once. I frowned, expecting to have been hit at least a few times. Instead, everything was silent.

My frown increased and I slowly peaked up around the hood of the van, my eyes going wide as I realized that the last drone was down as well, an arrow sticking out from its forward sensors. Tessa had managed to shoot it while it was focused on me, and I had missed the sound of it hitting the ground in the confusion. I stood slowly from my spot, looking up and around to see if any more drones were on their way.

"You good?" Tessa called out as she made her to the downed drone nearest to her, climbing up to retrieve her arrow.

"Yeah, nothing hit me," I responded, double checking myself to be sure. "Yeah, I'm good. You alright?"

"They never got close," She assured me, finally managing to yank her arrow free from the drone. "So... what the hell was that?"



"Like I said, it's the first enhanced challenge," I said, looking down at the drone I had taken down, crouching to get a better look. "I recognized these drones from home, and they were firing Zap rounds. Basic 'non-lethal' stuff that cops shoot at you."

"That sounded like sarcasm," she commented, making her way to the second drone she had taken down.

"That's because it was. The bullets are designed to break apart and deliver an electric shock to taking down the target, but they are still bullets," I said, shaking my head. "You get hit anywhere important and you are very much dead. Considering how strong the shock is, anywhere near the chest will stop the heart."

"Is this what you got shot with?" She asked, yanking her arrow free and clipping it to the side of her bow.

"... Forgot I told you about that..." I admitted. "I hope my mom isn't watching. I told her I pulled a muscle."

"You passed off a bullet wound as a pulled muscle?"

"She had too much on her plate to worry about as it was," I explained, shaking my head. "Didn't need to add anything to it."

"Right... well, still kind of stupid, in a sweet way," She responded, standing beside me. "So.. what's up? Wait, is there a cache nearby?"

I frowned and opened my map, shaking my head and closing it again.

"No... looks like they expect us to do these for free."

"Right... still think we shouldn't have skipped around as many as we could?" She asked with an "I told you so" look on her face, her arms crossed. "C'mon, if there aren't any rewards here, we need to keep moving."

"Yeah, alright."

## Chapter 17

We traveled on through the rest of the day, leaving the drone wrecks behind us as we pushed onwards. Eventually, as the sun started to set, we started looking for a place to take shelter. We knew that once we had started on this particular long roadway, there was no way we

would be able to make it in one day. With this in mind, we started looking for intact vehicles as the sun started to get low in the sky.

The plan was for us to find a car or truck and find a way to seal ourselves inside as best we could. The likelihood of something big stumbling on us was small, mainly because we were traveling at a decent pace, so as long as we had enough protection to keep from being spotted by screamers, we would hopefully be fine. At a minimum, a lot of the car trunks were mostly intact. Sleeping in such a tight, claustrophobic space would suck, but it would work.

As it got later and later, we both finally conceded that the night would be miserable, and we started looking for vehicles with large trunks. Eventually, we managed to find a truck with a large cap over the bed. It only took us a few minutes to open it up and push out everything inside, both of us doing our best to ignore that we were essentially dumping a family's most important possessions, including three boxes of family photo albums, out onto the ground.

On the plus side, there was a case of still intact water bottles and a box of assorted canned food tucked into the back. When the truck bed and cap were completely cleared out, we had a decent-sized space to sleep in, as well as a bunch of clothes and a blanket to act as a cushion and pillow. We quickly ate dinner, eating a few of the cans we found while clearing everything out.

The next morning, we headed back out, trying to make as much progress as possible. By the halfway point of the day, we had made it onto the general "path" that would eventually lead us to the golden point on the map. We spent the rest of the day making as much progress on that path as possible, looking for another place to sleep as it started to get late.

After a few hours of looking for any intact vehicle, both of us hoping for another, both of us were getting nervous, wondering if we would end up having to bite the bullet and stay in a car trunk.

Thankfully, about thirty minutes before we had to make a choice, we finally made it to one of the landmarks we were judging our progress on, a large bridge that crossed a wide river. On top of the reassurance that we were making a good headway, about two hundred meters before the bridge were the remains of a military checkpoint of some kind. It was definitely set up from movable materials, with rotted sandbags and metal constructs serving as a defensible position. Concrete barriers were set up to block the entire road, save one lane going through the checkpoint towards the bridge.

Past the checkpoint were the remains of small building, even more barriers and...

"You've got to be shitting me..." Tessa said. "What are the chances?"

"Well... considering it was a military vehicle... pretty good?" I guessed, smirking as Tessa climbed over one of the rotted sandbag structures, making a beeline through the checkpoint.

On the other side, parked at an angle with its front facing us, was an APC, just like the one we had been living in for the last few months. Its front end was marked with soot, as if it had been lit on fire, and it had *definitely* been stripped, but as we got closer we could see that it was still in pretty good shape.

"It's got less rust than the old one," I pointed out as Tessa climbed up to the roof, grabbing the handle for the hatch.

She tried to open it, grunting and straining, unable to move the latch system. When it refused to budge, she pulled out her safety knife and prepared to just solve the problem permanently.

"Woah, hold on!" I called out. "Let me try first, will you? You can try cutting it if I can't do it."

"Oh... right," She said, standing up and stepping back. "Yeah, give it a shot."

I climbed up on top of the APC and took her place, putting one hand on the handle and the other on a nearby grab bar for leverage. With a grunt, I pulled, slowly increasing how hard until I was definitely past what a normal human could achieve, into the range of a professional bodybuilder or Olympic lifter, and then slightly beyond that. For a moment, I didn't think it would budge until a scraping grinding sound came from the mechanism, and whatever had seized it gave out, the handle snapping open.

I opened the hatch, tentatively sticking my head into the long broken-down vehicle, wary of anything dangerous inside. It was in surprisingly good condition, no doubt, because it was sealed up so well inside the armor. I pulled my head out and worked the locking mechanism for a minute, making sure that we wouldn't get locked inside before hopping down inside, Tessa following right after me.

The interior was much more cramped than the old APC had been, as while this one had been stripped for parts long ago, there were still a lot of chairs, frames, and more inside. Still, there was plenty of room for us to sleep, especially if one of us sat in the driver's seat, which looked relatively comfortable. It was a very different feel compared to the old APC, but I couldn't deny having so much armor between me and the wildlife and mutants outside was comforting.

"I call the driver's seat," Tessa said, already climbing in to sit down. "I almost kept the one back home 'cause it was so comfortable."

We made ourselves at home, enjoying a cold dinner before settling in to sleep through the night. Even though I was sleeping on the cold metal floor, I slept like a baby. The next morning we woke up and reluctantly exited the armored vehicle. It was obvious that both of us wanted to make excuses to stay, as finding such a safe place outside of a walled-off town was clearly rare, but neither of us mentioned it.

The temptation to go back got even harder to ignore when we crossed the last two hundred meters to the bridge and got our first good look at it when it wasn't mostly blocked by trees and rusted-out vehicles.

The entire bridge had been heavily modified, and judging from the sign that said "Good Luck! ~ Illbryen" it had been done in preparation for us.

"I don't want to say I told you so... but I told you so," Tessa said, shaking her head. "If we had skipped a little, we could have avoided this."

"No, we wouldn't have," I disagreed. "The map shows this is the only bridge still standing for miles. Which was probably intentional."

The bridge had been heavily modified, with the road all the way from our side to the other being completely removed, giving us a clear view out into the water. The frame was completely intact, if a little rusty, and had been clearly reinforced recently. Between each side of the heavy metal frame was an array of platforms, ropes, wires, moving and spinning surfaces, and more than a few dangerous-looking traps. There was a single platform connected to our side of the road that was clearly where we were supposed to start from.

They had turned the entire bridge into a giant, lethal obstacle course.

Of course, it wasn't a normal one, either. As we looked, I started to notice some rather lethal-looking additions to the already harrowing challenge. The rope swings between a few platforms threw off sparks of electricity from where they were hung as they swung in the breeze. Several platforms shifted from safe to what looked like a roughly spiked surface every few seconds, while other platforms swung down until they were vertical. One of the obstacles was a spinning blade, definitely going fast enough to hurt us if we didn't jump between the platforms it was spinning over at the right time. One of the most obvious ones was a series of massive axes swinging back and forth.

It looked like a comical interpretation of a campy villain's trapped lair.

"Maybe... we could swim across?" I asked, both of us stepping closer to the edge, looking down at the water below.

I couldn't help but wince at how fast and rough the water was moving down the river. Obvious currents ran under the water, occasionally displacing visibly in certain spots, churning

the surface. It looked dangerous even if I was wearing nothing but a swimsuit, never mind that the water was probably filled with dangerous mutants. But between the very real chance something lethal lurked under the churning surface, and the large amount of equipment we were both carrying...

"I don't think that's an option," Tessa said, shaking her head. "While falling into the water looks like the least dangerous option for failure... I don't think that makes it any less dangerous."

I looked back down into the water, shivering when I recalled the slime monster that had almost caught us in the small park pond. There was no way these waters were empty, and I didn't like the odds of me fighting a sea monster.

"But... what about over it?" She asked, getting my attention and pointing to the metal structure that supported the bridge. "Looks big enough to climb on."

While the road had been removed, the main structure of the bridge was intact, even visibly reinforced. The metal structure started six or even feet before where the bridge would have started, going up in a sharp incline, leveling out flat, dropping back down on the other side. The metal beam that made up the structure was just wide enough that it was feasible to walk on top of it.

Tessa walked along the edge of where the road now dropped off, heading towards the metal structure of the bridge and away from the starting platform. She walked to where the supports reached the ground, examining it for a second before reaching out to a handhold, looking to start climbing.

There was a muffled zapping sound, and she jerked back, cursing and scowling at where she had touched. Before she could explain what happened, not that I needed it spelled out, a loud klaxon alarm went off, making both of us jump. I had my hand on my axe immediately while Tessa went for her pistol, the weapon almost drawn before we both realized nothing else was happening.

"What's the likelihood that if we do that enough, something bad is going to happen?" Tessa asked, and I rolled my eyes.

"I'm gonna guess pretty high," I responded, turning back to the starting platform, climbing my way up, and walking to the edge. "C'mon, this should be easy for you. I'm the one who is going to struggle."

"And that somehow makes it better?" She asked, walking back to the platform. Once she stepped up, a buzzer sounded, and from under the platform, a box slowly up, labeled "Extra storage. Accessible from either side."

"Well... at least I won't have to lug this around," I said, shrugging off my backpack and dropping it in the box, Tessa hesitantly putting her bow and quiver in as well.

Once we had finished taking off any unnecessary weight, the box flew away, stopping at the halfway point above the bridge, probably waiting for one of us to call it back or reach the other side and call it there. After watching it zip away, the bottom glowing with the telltale sign of mass reducers and hover tech, I turned to Tessa.

"Alright, I'm gonna go first in case there's some sort of trick, then-"

Before I could finish my plan, Tessa took two big steps back, ran and jumped across the first gap, landing easily on the second platform before turning back at me, smirking with her hand on her hip.

"You said it yourself. This is going to be much easier for me," She said. "I go first and help if you stumble. Now come on, don't want our audience to think you can't keep up, do you?"

I cursed and shook my head, taking a few extra steps back before running to the edge and jumping, holding my breath as I passed over the gap and landed on the platform.

"Great, now just the rest of it to go," Tessa joked, vaguely gesturing to the arrayed death trap in front of us. "Try and keep up!"

## Chapter 18

With the first obstacle, a simple gap over open air, next up was a series of jumps on seemingly ordinary platforms. If I had to guess, it was kept simple on purpose to ease us into the harrowing and ridiculously insane challenge. Tessa jumped from one to the other, making the last three without even stopping. I stopped for everyone, gauging distance and making sure I had a solid footing.

"This is the dumbest thing I think I have ever done," I said, shaking my head after I landed on the last simple platform.

"...It does seem a bit out there, even after the darkened warehouse," Tessa agreed, having waited for me before the next stage. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, let's just get this over with."

She nodded, and we both turned to face the next step, which was a series of slightly smaller platforms that were somewhat farther apart... and that collapsed, one after the other. We would have to jump as fast as we could to keep ahead of the collapse, meaning no time to prepare or judge distancing.

"One at a time?" Tessa asked, and I nodded. "Alright, see you on the other side."

She stepped back as far as she could, waiting for the first two platforms to reset. The second she had two platforms up, she ran and jumped, easily clearing the four or five-foot gap. After the first three jumps she slowed down, not because she was tired or anything, but because she had caught up with the platform resets and had to slow down until it was ready. It visibly threw off her groove, but she quickly recovered and finished quickly, not even short of breath.

"Leon!" She called back, hands to her mouth. "Jump the second the first platform is ready. It will give you time to prepare!"

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up, stepping back and preparing myself. When the first platform started to rise, I tensed, waiting for it to lock into place before running and leaping across the gap. I did my best not to look down, focusing on the next platform. Even with Tessa's trick, I didn't have much time to prepare, not if I wanted any sort of buffer between me and the collapsing platforms behind me. In the end, I was very glad I had that buffer as well, as when I was about to leap from the third last to the second last, I misstepped and had to stop. Luckily, I had time to line up again, but it was still a heart-pounding experience.

The in-between platform for the next section was wide enough for us to stand on it together, but not much more. Thankfully, the next stage wouldn't require us to jump between platforms. Unfortunately, it was also the first introduction to a dangerous trap element, a series of dangerous-looking pendulums with comically large axe heads on them, swinging back and forth. There were only six of them, but the path through them doubled back across their range, forcing us to go through them multiple times. They swung too low to go under and would absolutely kill either of us if we took one head-on. My shield would block the first hit, but there was a good chance the force from the impact would knock me off the platform.

"Fuck me... Okay, I'm going first this time," I said, stepping forward just short of the dangerous part of the path. "I can tank one of their hits at least."

Tessa didn't argue, and I watched the axe-shaped obstacle swing back and forth, looking for the perfect time. Once I started, I would be hard-pressed to stop, as there was clearly less and less room between each axe. This would mean coming back would get easier, but it also meant I would have to go through it in this direction, the more difficult direction, twice.

With a muttered curse, I ran forward, making it through the first two axes easily, stopping to let the third swing past, the breeze tugging at my jacket. The second it was past, I dove past it, jumping and stopping again to dodge the last axe, stepping on the other side with a long string of curses. On the turn, I had some space to breathe and recover, walking back around to the axes. I waited a solid two minutes, working up my nerves. Tessa didn't comment on how long it took me to work up the nerve to go again, this time moving toward her.

I threw myself as hard as I could, managing to jump through three paces with one hard leap, dodging three swinging blades. I only had to wait a split second to jump past the fourth and fifth blades, but I almost got clipped by the last as I jumped the gun. I could hear Tessa cursing to herself.

"You okay?" She asked, close enough now to not need to shout.

"Yeah, it missed," I responded. "Barely."

She silently nodded, and I stopped to take another moment before walking around the third and final loop. I watched the blades go back and forth, trying to feel their timing rather than have to actually count it out. After another minute, I jumped forward, sliding to a stop and letting the third axe pass, stepping forward and letting the fourth go as well.

I managed to move forward before the third clipped me, but the timing was off. The fifth axe was too far in its swing, but the fourth would no doubt hit me before it would be in the perfect place. I shouted a curse and risked it, lunging forward between them, somehow making it through both of them. Unfortunately, in my panic, I hadn't timed the sixth axe properly, and as I passed that it clipped me in the shoulder, slamming into the protective barrier of my purple-level chest armor. The red shield lit up and broke, but it was enough for my momentum to carry me through and out of danger. I stumbled and fell, rolling to a stop just before sliding off the finish platform.

"LEON!" Tessa shouted, a scream of horror and fear.

"I'm alright!" I shouted back, sitting up despite my sore arm and shoulder. "I'm okay!"

I looked back to see Tessa holding her head in her hands. For a moment, she was silent before standing up straight and looking at me.

"Are you sure?" She asked, her voice warbling just the slightest.

"Yeah, the barrier saved me," I assured her. "My shoulder is gonna be bruised, but I'm fine."

"Alright... just sit tight, I'm coming through," She said, getting ready to rush forward.

"Hey! Hold on a second!" I shouted back. "Just sit down for a second and think. Calm down before trying it, alright?"

"I'm fine," She said, focused on the path.

"But... But I'm not!" I said, coming up with an excuse. "I need a minute to calm down before watching you, so give me a minute to recover, alright?"



She stopped and opened her mouth to shout back, but snapped it shut and closed her eyes. After a moment, she nodded and sat down. I sighed and laid back down on the larger platform, ignoring the sounds of the axes swinging back and forth. The truth was, I was worried about her. I had a chance to survive a hit, as I had just shown, but for Tessa, a hit would almost definitely cut into her deep. Between the most likely grievous blow and the water beneath, there was very little chance she would survive, to say nothing about how she would continue if she somehow managed to get hit but still reach me.

About five minutes went by before I heard Tessa taking a deep breath. I looked up just in time to watch her dash through paths of the first four axes, stopping to let the fifth swing by before diving across the remaining distance. She rolled once and popped back to her feet, confidently making her way to the first double back, and after only pausing for a few moments, made it through that as well. She took a bit longer to make her way through the last bend but finished with an easy dive past the sixth swinging axe, coming to a stop right beside me.

"Damn... You're gonna make me look bad," I said as she stood, holding out her hand to help me up.

"You were definitely right. This really plays to the serums I took. The reflex and speed together-"

"Don't jinx it just yet," I said, cutting her off before she could say something we regretted. "We are only like two-fifths across. We have a bit more to go."

She chewed her lip and nodded, looking ahead to what came next. Neither of us had really been paying attention, between wanting to focus on the challenge at hand and the criss-crossing nature of some of the sections, making it hard to tell what was where. However, now that it was here, it was obvious that the rope swinging was next, and I was even more nervous about it than I had been originally. There were seven rope swings in a row, the first two separated by their own platforms. The next one had two ropes in a row before there was a platform to land on, while the final group had three. Even worse was that a low hum spread through the area every several seconds, accompanied by zapping and crackling from where each rope connected a beam above us.

"Right... so swinging across without letting the rope taze the fuck out of us," Tessa said, shaking her head. "If it's arcing and zapping like that, it's going to be a lot, probably enough to go through our gloves and definitely enough to fuck up our swing."

"My shield won't help with it either," I added, getting a confused look. "The rope would already be in contact with me. The shield won't do anything for that."

"What about your gloves?" She asked. "They are stupid future bullshit, right? Will they protect you?"

"I... probably not?" I said with very little confidence. "Can't imagine they let me blast through their challenge, not when they have had so long to prepare. I've had these for a while, way before their offer."

"Well, if you're not gonna get any advantages, I'll go first," She suggested. "But you can follow right behind me."

"Fine, I'll try not to rush you," I smirked, Tessa smacking my shoulder as she stepped up to swing across.

For a minute, she watched the top end of the rope, getting a feel for the electric deterrent that sparked and hummed.

"Seems about five or six seconds," She said, still watching. "Not enough time to correct yourself if you fuck up..."

"So don't," I answered. "You can do it."

"I was more worried about you!" She said, half shouting the last word as she jumped, grabbed the rope, and swung across the gap, expertly landing on the other side.

I was surprised when she held onto the rope, the seconds counting down. After about two or three seconds, she clenched, grunting as she got shocked, the muscles in her arm twitching, spasming hard enough that she dropped the rope, which swung back into place. After a moment of recovery, she shook her head.

"No way we can just take that and keep swinging," She explained, rubbing her arm. "Give me a few minutes for my hand to start working again."

"Yeah, take all the time you need," I responded, holding back my reprimand, not when I had planned on doing the same thing once I landed on the platform she was now on.

We took about a fifteen-minute break before Tessa stood up and swung across to the second platform, the last one before the gap with two ropes. I made my first jump relatively easily, landing smoothly and standing up straight, just in time to watch Tessa easily transfer from one rope to the other, landing perfectly on the next platform. I cursed and prepped for my next one, jumping and swinging, landing on the next platform with just a little stumble. Tessa was preparing for her last swinging set, so I stopped and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to calm my stressed heart.

I opened my eyes in time to watch my partner as she lunged to the first rope, actually jumping before the zapping and sparking electricity stopped, timing it so when she grabbed the first rope, the electricity was just cutting off. She swung from the first to the second to the third,

jumping off and landing on the platform with a slight skid, recovering easily. After a moment, she turned to look at me.

"Take your time!" She called back. "Try to time it just right to give yourself the most time, especially the last one."

"Trust me, I will," I responded, though I was mostly muttering to myself.

I took a minute to watch the sparking, waiting for a good opportunity to jump, waiting for the ropes to stop swinging before looking for a good opportunity. When I saw it, I made a running leap, catching the first rope easily. While Tessa had the advantage in speed and dexterity, I still had a large strength advantage. I could easily hold myself up with one hand for a while, meaning I easily reached out with one hand, grabbed the second rope, and held it tightly, carrying my momentum through into another swing, this time landing on a platform.

"Nice!" Tessa said, pumping her fist. "Now you need as much time as possible, and make sure to really throw yourself into each transfer, or you won't have enough momentum."

Not trusting my voice, I simply nodded, shaking myself out a bit before getting into the right stance. Once again, I waited for the perfect opportunity, trying to get a good sense of it before running and jumping forward, latching onto the first rope.

I swung through and reached out for the second rope without issue, or at least no issue that I could see. Tessa, however, spotted something immediately.

"Throw yourself into it!" She shouted, but it was too late, and I had already started reaching for the third rope.

I grabbed it easily, swinging forward as I released the second rope. As I moved forward, I finally saw that I didn't have nearly enough momentum. I reached the apex of my swing, feeling myself slow just short of what I needed to land on the next platform feet first. Knowing that the shock would get me, though, I took a chance and jumped, throwing myself forward as hard as I could.

I slammed into the side of the platform, my shield flickering at the harshness of the blow, catching a lot of the momentum. It was honestly the only reason the air wasn't completely driven from my chest, which would have made scrambling to keep from sliding off impossible. Tessa was there a moment later, taking my hand and helping me pull myself up, scrambling as she fell backward, managing to pull me up until I was more on than off, letting me slide forward.

I immediately rolled over onto my back and spread myself out, the world spinning from the adrenaline and panic pumping through my body. Tessa kneeled beside me for a moment, looking down at me, our eyes connecting. She almost immediately slid down against me, holding onto me as we both recovered from what had just happened.

## Chapter 19

We spent about twenty minutes lying down on the platform, catching our breath and calming down with my brush with possible death. Eventually, Tessa sat up, looking back on the rope segment.

"We gotta get going," She said, prompting me to sit up as well. "We need enough time to look for shelter, as much as I would like to take a break."

I nodded and stood up carefully, helping her get up right after. We both turned to the rest of the "obstacle course," analyzing what obstacles we had left. With the rope swing completed, we had reached the halfway point of the bridge, distance-wise at least, with three sections remaining. The first one was the spiked platforms, which, now that we were closer, looked a lot more serious. From a distance, the spikes looked painful, but now it was clear that they would absolutely destroy my feet if I stood on them.

Past that was the spinning blades, a series of wide spinning arms with sharp blades, some which we would have to jump over and some that we would have to duck under. The blades all spun from a central point, and the third one was going significantly faster than the first. The last challenge was a series of near-vertical platforms, hanging bars, and ropes that we would have to climb through, all while parts moved up and down drastically, slamming into place with enough force to test our grip.

Once we had delayed for another few minutes, Tessa let out a growl. I could tell she was annoyed at herself for putting it off, or at least something like that. Before I could say anything, she was gone, jumping to the first platform, quickly jumping to the next, zig zagging from platform to platform. It took a second for me to follow her, as I had to wait for the pattern to come around again, but I was soon hot on her tail. We both had a few close calls, with Tessa managing to avoid having to jump backward, but I had to backtrack twice, almost getting my feet impaled in the process.

When I finally landed on the platform between sections, Tessa had been waiting a full two minutes for me. She didn't say anything, instead just turning around to start on the next section.

"Fucking hell Tessa, give me a second, will you?" I asked, reaching out and grabbing her arm.

"Fine, fine," She said, letting out a deep breath. "I just..."

"Don't want to let them think they are winning?"

"...yeah."

"They don't care about winning, Tessa," I explained, letting her arm go. "Or at least, not like you think. They don't care about us surviving or standing up to them. They make money either way, which means in their mind they always win. Just focus on making it through, alright?"

She nodded, and after a few minutes we began making our way through the next challenge, the long spinning blades. We jumped from platform to platform, each only about three feet wide, stopping to jump up over one blade, quickly ducking under another. At first glance, the blades were going too slow to do any actual damage, but as we got closer, it was clear they weren't normal knives. A high-pitched whine told me they were vibrating, which probably meant they would slice through us easily. It also meant we would slide right off if we tried to jump on the thick metal blade itself.

Still, as lethal as it was, we slowly made our way through, taking our time until the last set of blades and platforms, where we had to rush through to avoid getting stuck in a no-win situation. Tessa crossed easily, making her last jump with a little boost from her jumping boots, easily going over one of the blades made to be ducked under, landing on the next in-between platform. I was forced to take it a bit slower but soon joined her before our final challenge.

By now, the other side of the bridge was tantalizingly close, and we both had to visibly calm ourselves to keep from rushing through to make it to solid ground.

The last challenge was a series of jumps between ropes, hand bars, wall jumps, and several other things, a final gauntlet before we were finally done. Most of it boiled down to core strength, which meant that in an odd twist, this last section would be easier for me than it was for Tessa. Or it would be if you ignored the fact that all of this required reflexes and that the wall jumps required almost perfect timing. Still, since I had the advantage, I went first, jumping from the platform to a series of monkey bar-like grips. We both agreed that we would wait until the other was done, since there was no place to pause if someone needed a second to collect themselves.

I made my way through the gauntlets easily enough, my enhanced muscles easily handling my own weight, making it much less difficult to judge the jumps and grabs. The hardest part was jumping from a bar onto a near-vertical platform and then jumping back off to grab a rope. They had to do this twice; the whole point was to get around a solid wall blocking the way. By the time I landed, my arms were actually tired, despite my enhancements.

Luckily, while Tessa's enhancements were more for speed, her stamina was also improved. This would hopefully mean she could complete this despite not being tailored to brute forcing her way through.

I held my breath as she started, slowly making her way through the course. I knew that with her enhanced reflexes meant that she wasn't in danger of missing a jump or a grab. Instead, her biggest issue would be keeping up her strength. I could see her getting tired, slowing down quite a bit after making it through the wall jump barriers. I could also see her determination, forcing herself to keep going despite her obvious struggle. When she finally jumped from the last point onto the platform I half caught her, keeping her from collapsing or stumbling as we walked away from the edge. Once we were both on solid asphalt again, that was when we dropped.

We sat down, slowly leaning against each other as we caught our breath and processed what we had managed to survive. Tessa leaned her head back, looking up and resting on my shoulder, our backs together.

"So what, still no reward for jumping through their hoops?" She eventually asked after we had both calmed down. "Seems kinda like we deserve a reward for making it through that."

I wordlessly pulled up my map, activating it before putting my arm down again and shaking my head.

"Nothing on the map," I responded. "At least nothing nearby. There's a blue somewhere that way, and a green that way."

I pointed off into the distance twice, away from the road, gesturing to where the nearest caches were. After taking another look at the map, I continued.

"By the way, we are gonna cross into where there aren't any more caches pretty soon. We never really talked about it... Should we hunt down a few more before heading on?"

"Is there any we could reach by the end of the day?"

"...No, not that I can see, at least," I admitted. "Closest is like a full day of travel away."

"Then let's focus on the road to the golden point. We can't risk either of us getting injured and forcing us to slow down again," She pointed out, letting out a long breath. "We have some spare time, but it's less than I would like, especially if something major happens. If we stumble on one that's within a shorter distance... we can discuss it when it happens."

"Alright, a good a plan as any."

We sat together for another ten or so minutes before we finally stood up and continued on our journey, leaving the bizarre, dangerous obstacle course behind us. About five minutes in, Tessa let out a chuckle, quickly devolving into giggles and laughter, going on for long enough that she had to lean on me.

"What was that about?" I asked when she had finally calmed down enough to speak.

"I'm- oh god. I'm just imagining the poor wandering trader or explorer stumbling on the bridge and wondering what the fuck is going on," She said, still fighting her chuckles. "Even ignoring the fact that it's built out of super-advanced bullshit, imagine trying to figure out what the fuck it's for!"

I snorted and joined her in a new round of laughing, both of us eventually sitting down. It felt good to laugh, and neither of us commented just how much of it was hysterics. When we had finally recovered enough to move, we headed back down the road, occasionally adding new bits to the joke as they came to us.

"Can you imagine someone stumbling onto the dark warehouse?" I asked.

"Oh god, I hope a cult or something stupid doesn't get started from that!"

After about an hour of walking, we once again started looking for a place to sleep. Thankfully, about thirty minutes later, we stumbled into a rest stop just off the side of the highway. We quietly explored the mostly concrete and brick building, making sure to clear it as best we could before eventually stumbling on a break room, which luckily only had one door. We dropped off our bags and did a little more exploring, managing to find a few bags of preserved food in the shop, as well as a few cans of soda from what looked like a burger place of some kind.

We settled down and enjoyed a small feast, even pouring our soda into our chilling canteen, which we had already drained after completing the obstacle course.

"What do you think is next?" Tessa asked, crumpling up an empty bag of crackers and throwing it out the door of the break room. "We've had killer drones and an obstacle course. What do you think they are going to try and kill us with next?"

I pulled up my map again, taking a sip of my cold soda while I considered the distance we had left.

"Well...if the dark warehouse was the first trick they pulled, and the drones were the second... it looks like they wait for a certain distance before hitting us with another one," I said, Tessa, leaning on my shoulder to see the map better as I pointed at it. "If they keep following that... We might have two more? Not including whatever final challenge they have."

"Yeah, alright, assuming they care enough to actually follow a pattern," Tessa responded. "But *what* do they have in store, that's what really matters."

"I don't know. Hopefully its something easy," I said, Tessa, snorting in response. "Maybe something we can skip if we are lucky."

"Oh, finally agreeing that skipping is a good idea?"

"If we can make it entertaining? Sure," I said with a shrug. "There are a lot of things that they could do. I kind of don't want to jinx it."

"I bet it's something bigger," Tessa said, ignoring my warning. "They seem to be getting larger and larger in scale, right?"

"...yeah, it seems to be that way," I admitted, shaking my head. "What could be bigger than an entire highway bridge?"

"... Two highway bridges?"

I shook my head and threw a chocolate bar wrapped at Tessa, the woman chuckling as I did. Eventually, we finished up eating and cleared out a space for us to sleep. Earlier, Tessa had carried each of us a pile of dish towels to use as pillows. We laid down on the floor, both of us quickly falling asleep.

The next morning we filled out packs with whatever food and drinks we could after eating another large meal for breakfast. When we were done, we both took the time to use three large bottles of water each to wash off using the pile of towels we had slept on to dry off. I thanked whoever was watching that all of my clothes were now the advanced clothes from white crates because I didn't want to imagine how horrible it would be to put on the same pair of pants after having just washed off.

When we were clean and ready, we set back out, making our way back to the highway and heading off.

## Chapter 20

We made great progress over the next several days.

A combination of high spirits, an eagerness to get off this hellhole, and a deep-seated determination meant that we were both willing to go the extra mile to make as much progress as possible each day. We would wake up early, leave almost immediately and travel until the last minute, as long as it was safe. When we could, we ate on the move, though what we had on hand to eat wasn't always the easiest to manage.

We did hit a couple of issues that slowed us down. A small pack of tuskers attacked us two days after crossing the bridge. We had just gotten off the large road system we had been



following for so long, making our way through a small pit-stop town when it happened. Luckily, by now, we were more than ready to handle four medium-sized mutants, and we quickly dispatched them. Tessa's new enhanced arrows proved to be extremely effective, even with their thick hide.

Once the pack of mutant boar was dispatched, we spent a bit of time scavenging the town, finding a decent amount of food before moving on, eventually taking cover for the night in a concrete structure just outside of town. Tessa claimed it was some sort of public storage space, but it looked a bit overbuilt for that to me. Either way, it served as a decent place to catch some sleep. When we were settled in, I started a fire, cooking a large amount of boar meat, which we eagerly ate. Food was turning out not to be nearly as much of an issue as we had assumed it would be.

Over the next few days we continued to travel, the tension rising slowly with every passing day. We were due another absurd, artificial challenge, and every step that we didn't find made us more and more worried about what we would eventually stumble into. It wasn't until we stumbled into another small town that we finally found it.

At first, neither of us realized anything was happening. While crossing through the town, we were ambushed by five skelly-wolves out of nowhere. It wasn't until the first canine mutant that Tessa took down stood back up that we realized something was very off. After killing a few of them, the first bone-plated mutant Tessa had killed stood back up and continued attacking us. Despite the arrow that was stuck in its chest, an injury that should have definitely killed it or at least kept it down, the monster charged me and almost managed to grab my arm with its jaws.

"Did you see that?" Tessa asked, kicking one of the mutants off of the car we were standing on.

"I did!" I shouted back, slamming my axe into the side of another wolf.

The first would soon proved to not be a fluke, as the rest of the dispatched mutants stood again, making a beeline for us.

"Keep hitting them," I shouted, slamming my axe into the side of another previously killed wolf. "Hopefully, there's a limit!"

We held them off for another ten minutes before we finally did enough damage to the obviously enhanced mutants. Sinking my axe into its skull, even after it had collapsed and stopped moving, only seemed prudent after the fifth and six times they stood back up.

"What... the fuck... was that?" Tessa asked, breathing heavily despite her own enhancements.

"Probably... what we would... be capable... of with a dozen.... health serums," I responded, equally out of breath.

"They... go that high?" She responded, giving me a harsh look. "We should have been looking for more!"

"No, I don't think our version stacks that high. I was kidding," I admitted, shaking my head. "It's probably some other serum or modification."

"I want one."

"I don't," I said with a shiver. "There is no way they were really still alive, not after how many times I caved their skulls in. They must have been being controlled or puppeted by something because brain injuries like that don't heal with memories or whatever still intact."

"Oh... god. Yeah, that's gross," She said, realizing what I meant.

We spent a few minutes recovering before dragging the wolves into a nearby wooden building, some sort of store that had half collapsed. Once they were inside, Tessa started a fire, which quickly spread until the whole store was in flames, the wolves burning inside. It was probably paranoia, but I really didn't want to wake up to a pack of unkillable mutant wolves any time soon. Plus, who knows what would happen if another mutant ate them. I did not want to find out if the enhancements could be passed on.

When we were certain the fire would keep going, we quickly left the town behind, not stopping until we found a place to stay in the basement of a small house. We blocked the entrances and sat down to tend to our wounds, which were shockingly minor. I had a few bit marks on my arms and one on my thigh, and Tessa had one on her leg, but luckily, nothing near how bad I had gotten bitten by one of the canine mutants so long ago.

With our healing enhancements, we will be fine in a few days. We wouldn't even have to take it easy in the meantime.

"We got really fucking lucky," Tessa said, wrapping up my arm to keep blood from getting everywhere since both of us were immune to infections. "Anything more serious than these bites, and we would be in trouble."

"We could make it," I assured her. "We have some spare time. Not as much as I would like, but we have, like... a few days, maybe?"

"Not nearly enough for a broken bone, Leon," She pointed out.

"I know. But we would find a way," I said, continuing to assure her, shifting as she finished my arm so I could bandage her leg. "We are going home Tessa, if one of us has to carry the other."

She shook her head, but said nothing, letting me wrap up her leg before sitting back on the old dusty couch. After a few long minutes, she nodded to my arm.

"What's the map look like?"

"I checked it earlier..." I said, pulling it up again so she could see it. "Our theory of the challenges being a broken up event? I think that was wrong. The stretch between the bridge and today is almost a full six days. If that repeats, we will only be a few days away from the golden point, which I don't think they would do... Well I hope they won't."

"So there's a chance we are done with these challenges?"

"Until we reach the final one?" I clarified, Tessa nodding. "If we get really lucky...maybe."

Once again, early the following day, we headed out on what was hopefully the last leg of our journey. Our destination was closer than ever, and while we were still worried about what we had to face, focusing on the hope that we wouldn't have to deal with any more bullshit before that final challenge made each step feel lighter.

Slowly but surely, we left the town behind us, finding ourselves back on another long stretch of road. It was smaller than the highway we had just navigated but no less jam-packed with old cars. The first fifteen minutes' worth of vehicles were charred and sagging, seemingly softened by an intense fire that spread from car to car. I could only hope they were empty when it started.

"... You know, we didn't think that fire through very much," I said as we walked between burnt-out wrecks. "Think it's gonna spread?"

"The shop?" She asked, shaking her head when I hummed in confirmation. "No, it's been raining pretty consistently, so nothing is really dry. Plus, there was some clear space around it and not a whole lot of nearby trees."

"Do fires like that happen?"

"Sometimes, if it gets really dry," She responded with a shrug. "But I've never seen one up close."

We spent another three days on that road and one it connected to, taking shelter in a mostly intact van one night and another truck for the second. On the third night, we found a small house right off one of the roads. We barricaded it as best we could before taking shifts

since we were just hanging out on the first floor rather than in a hidden attic or a protected basement.

Things started to get tense once again as we continued on for the next two days, both of us just waiting for the second shoe to drop. We ended up being much more quiet than usual as we were both affected by the tension. On the fourth day, seven since the regenerating wolf mutants, I had finally had enough.

"I think we can finally focus on the gold dot," I said as we walked past a broken-down building. "We are only three days away from the golden dot, and we haven't seen anything. Unless we missed something, I don't think they are going to try anything. It wouldn't be fair."

Tess stopped and turned to me, one eyebrow raised as she looked at me. I rolled my eyes and reluctantly nodded.

"Yes, expecting a noble to care about fairness is a stretch, but remember that they want this to be entertaining," I pointed out. "Crippling us so the big finale just kills us outright, especially when we have made it so far, doesn't sound very entertaining, does it?"

"...Alright, I can see that logic at least," Tessa admitted. "Do you think they approve of us trying to break down what they have prepared like this?"

"Are you kidding me? Finding loopholes and taking advantage of lopsided deals is practically a sacred duty for a noble," I said, shaking my head. "I doubt they even realized not doing it was an option."

Tessa laughed, and we both focused back on walking, pushing ourselves to reach our destination. We stayed in an old church basement, sealing up the entrance with a bookcase before sleeping on a bed of old sheets.

The next day started as most traveling days did, waking up early and making as much progress as possible during the safest part of the day. We crossed another bridge, this one much smaller and not turned into a massive death trap. It was still a bit nerve-wracking, though, because, without any outside repairs, it was a lot less sturdy. Several times we had to jump over holes or carefully climb past worrying cracks.

After the bridge, we made more progress, stopping at one point after spotting some worrying tracks in the dirt. Tessa eventually concluded that they were old enough not to worry about and that we were probably safe. We still hastily crossed through the general area, both of us on high alert, weapons out and ready.

Pretty soon, with another couple of days of travel, we were finally reaching the golden dot. We were cautiously making progress at this point, worried that our final challenge would jump out and ambush us at any minute.

As we slowly climbed a hill, following a broken and cracked road, we both agreed that it would be better to stop on top to start looking for the target. Chances were that we would be able to spot it, and Tessa desperately wanted to avoid walking into another enhanced skelly wolf situation, which I agreed wholeheartedly with. We got to the top of the hill after a short walk, carefully looking around every house we passed, our blood pressure rising as we did. The golden mark on my map was still a long way out, long enough that we would probably be fine, but it was hard to fight the anticipation anxiety.

When we finally reached the top of the hill, which was surprisingly big, we climbed on top of one of the taller houses we could see, before looking around as best we could. Luckily, the houses were built on a relatively cleared-out hill, the overgrowth sticking to thick, gnarled bushes and shrubs rather than larger trees. We could see clearly out over the town, all the way to the park that marked the center. It was a decent-sized town, with four main roads leading to that center park, which also just happened to be where my map said our ticket back home was.

With her zoom glasses, it didn't take long for Tessa to spot what was different about this town.

"There.... There are robots," She said, as if she didn't believe what she was saying. "Dozens of them... no, more like hundreds. It's... it's like they populated the entire town with them!"

## Chapter 21

It took a minute past her declaration for Tessa to pass me her glasses, which I quickly put on my face, peering down into the town. Sure enough, dozens of basic, relatively crude robots were walking around, going from building to building, exploring the town. All of them were bipedal and while most of them seemed to be around human sized, some of them towered over the rest. I could see a few of them were armed with guns, but the vast majority of them were wielding pipes, rebar, and other sharpened instruments of violence.

I kept looking around the streets, observing the seemingly random robots dispersed throughout the town, before focusing on the park in the center of the town. It was in perfect condition. It looked like a team of gardeners had just finished tending it just minutes ago, which told me that there was some noble bullshit going on. Sitting in the center of the perfectly gardened park, I could see a stone platform of some kind, also cleared of rubble or overgrowth. On that platform were two black boxes, the shape of which I remember from when I first arrived here. Between them was a plinth with a big red button on it. I pulled off the glasses and handed them back to Tessa.

"Look at the center of town, at the park. It's all cleared of overgrowth and-"

"Are those how we get home?" She asked, leaning forward and adjusting the special glasses. "They don't look like much."

"Yeah, that's how we get home," I confirmed. "We each sit in one, and it takes us back, according to what I was told before I left."

"What's it say on the side of the thing in between them?"

I frowned and held out my hand, my partner handing her binocular glasses back over. It took me a second to find the center again, focusing on the pedestal. Sure enough, there was some writing on the side. The writing was too small for me to read, but I easily recognized the symbol.

"It's an emergency stop button," I explained, pulling off the advanced eyewear. "It is required by law to have them in any business that uses self-controlled equipment around people. If you hit it, all equipment that is self-directing in the building shuts down. It's supposed to be in case the cleaning bot glitches and tries to clean people with acid or stop whatever other nightmares people used to have about robot workers."

"So... we get to the center of the town, press the button and what, all the robots turn off?"

"I... That's what it looks like," I answered, holding my hands up when she gave me a harsh look. "I don't know! It's not like I can read the instruction manual from here. If this was a Jumbo Value Mart, then yes, that button would turn off all the robots and drones and whatever else. But here... All I can say is probably."

She put on her binocular glasses again and looked down into the town, silent for around a minute before pulling them off and closing her eyes.

"Okay, we can do this," She mumbled to herself, turning around and sitting back against the roof of the house we were perched on. "What's the likelihood that this is a puzzle challenge? That we could talk our way through."

"Not very good," I responded, pretty sure she knew that already but choosing to humor her. "They are almost all armed in some way, no reason to do that if we weren't supposed to fight them."

"Alright, so no puzzle. What are the chances of sneaking through? Or just saying fuck it and running through it?"

"For you... decent?" I guessed, shaking my head. "I wouldn't stand a chance at it, not with my top speed like, what, half of yours? Two-thirds?"

"Well... you said they like loopholes. What if I did it alone?" She suggested, chewing her lip. "I use my jacket to go invisible, cross as much distance as possible before it runs out, and blitz the last bit. I slap the button, and you take your time."

"That... Might work?" I painfully admitted. "But that looks like almost a full mile. Your jacket doesn't last that long, and even with your enhancement, can you run full tilt for that long?"

"... Maybe?" She admitted just as reluctantly. "Alright, do you have a better idea?"

"Yeah. I start making noise, and you head in," I said with a shrug. "I keep them distracted until you reach the button and shut it down."

"What? No, there are way too many," She said with a harsh shake of her head. "You'll get overwhelmed."

We were quiet for a while. Both of us knew exactly what we were trying to do: make sure the other person was safe by putting ourselves in more danger. I shook my head and laid back on the slanted roof, looking up at the slightly cloudy sky.

"We could just go for it."

"What, just head right in, smash our way through?" She asked, laying back with me. "Brute force isn't exactly the smartest play."

"But we would be together," I pointed out quietly. "It doesn't have to be pure brute force anyways. Why don't we do some recon, see how many of them there are, and then come up with a plan?"

Tessa nodded, and I pulled out my drone, activating it and sending it off, steering it through my implant. We watched the projected screen together as I directed the drone out over the town. When it got there, I slowly lowered it down low enough so we could see the streets and count the robots. As I circled and crisscrossed, we noted large concentrations of robots. We quickly realized that the distinctions between them went beyond just what they were armed with or their size.

The largest seemed to be lumbering giants, slow and shoddily built but armed with the biggest or best quality guns. Meanwhile, the smaller sized robots seemed to be in better shape but armed with nothing more than metal poles. Stranger still, the small ones seemed to be the only ones capable of noticing the drone, even going so far as to throw their weapons at it when it flew close enough. One particularly lucky machine, no bigger than a large dog, happened to be on the roof of a building when I flew over. It tagged the drone with a rusted pipe, causing the

drone to spin and spiral for a moment before it reoriented itself. I quickly pulled it back up high, far out of range.

"Okay, so it's not completely hopeless," I said, shaking my head. "I think we could both easily stay ahead of the slow ones, and it doesn't look like they can see anything long-range."

"Unless they are fucking with us," Tessa added, catching the drone as I flew it back to us, passing it to me.

I took it back and turned it over in my hands, finding where it had been hit. There was a slight scuff mark from where the pipe had smacked into the side, but as far as I could tell, it was just superficial. I brushed it off a bit before putting it back in my backpack.

"Yeah, there is that..." I reluctantly admitted. "But don't forget-"

"Their first priority is making money, which they won't do if they screw us over," She finished for me. "I'm not sure that adding a last-minute twist would come across as screwing us, but I understand. Alright, so how do we get to the park and hit that button?"

We sat on the roof for a while, each of us trying to come up with some trick or strategy that would make this safe, or at least safer than just attacking head-on and getting overrun.

"From what we saw... they can communicate, but it has a range," I said, thinking out loud. "So what if we clear out an area, take a break, and then move on to the next?"

"Sounds a lot like brute forcing it, but it's better than just bum rushing it to the center," Tessa admitted. "Are you sure-"

"No, you are not just sprinting to the center," I repeated without waiting for her to finish. "Getting spotted by one seemed to get the attention of every robot a block... How many of them were in a block?"

"Like fifteen, unless there are some hiding inside buildings," She answered. "... do you think there are any hiding inside?"

"No, they would have come out when the bots started throwing stuff at the drone," I explained, pausing for a moment before adding a bit more. "But we should definitely check before heading in, even if I have to sacrifice the drone."

We spitballed ideas for a while. Tessa added onto the idea of sacrificing the drone on purpose, giving us a chance to make headway when the droid converged on it. It wasn't the worst idea. I had no desire to bring the drone back with us, and if it could pull away any of the bots I would consider its role fulfilled and leave it behind.



After an hour, we finally had an outline of a plan, which started with us traveling around the outside of the town center, as there was a better angle to enter from and we both agreed that we wanted the deck stacked in our favor as much as possible.

For now, though, we would find a place to spend the rest of the day and night. It wasn't even close to dark out, but we both agreed that attacking in the morning would be better. We climbed down off of the roof and searched the residential neighborhood, eventually finding a basement under a mostly intact house.

After settling on a spot, we did a bit of scaving for some extra food before barricading ourselves in the basement as we had done dozens of times before. We cleared the room to have space to sleep, pushing aside old boxes of clothes and other stuff to the side. The basement was on the smaller side, but it was pretty easy to make room when you didn't really care about any of the junk inside the boxes and containers.

When we were done, we sat down on the floor, using some clothes and a blanket as a cushion. We cracked open our food, some of which we had found upstairs and some of which we had been carrying. We ate silently, mentally going over our strategy, both of us too far inside our heads to really talk. Eventually, the silence got to me, however, and I let out a sigh.

"We just need to give it our all," I said. "Not much more we could do than that."

For a long moment, she didn't respond, eventually looking up at me from a can of vegetables.

"Leon... I appreciate all of this. You've given me a chance to get out of this hell hole, and... Well, the less said about my mental state when we first found each other, the better. I... I just want you to know that even if I don't make it with you, this gives me hope... giving me something to work for... I can't thank you enough."

She trailed off for a moment, looking over at the dusty pile of junk that we had made on one side of the room, chewing her lip. I opened my mouth to assure her that we would both be getting out of here when she cut me off.

"I guess what I'm saying is I don't want to be the reason you don't make it home," She explained. "If it comes down to it, between saving me and hitting that button... don't get yourself killed trying to get me home. Promise me you go home."

"... are you fucking crazy?" I asked, Tessa finally turning to look at me, her eyes a bit misty but mostly opened wide at my response. "Tessa, there is no I'm going to promise you that! You are the only reason I have any chance at all of making it back to my family. I mean, without you, I wouldn't have even made it out of the city! I've already done what I can for my family, and while I will do everything I possibly can to get back to them, leaving you behind is not something I consider possible."

She kept looking at me for a long moment. Eventually, I reached out, holding my hand open for her to take. Her eyes trailed down, looking at my hand before eventually reaching out and taking it. When her hand was in mine, I pulled her closer until she was sitting with me, her head on my shoulder. I wrapped both of my arms around her, pulling her against me until we were both comfortable.

"We are going to fucking crush this, alright?" I assured her. "We have done some incredible things the past few months, and this is just another incredible thing we need to do. We've got this."

She sniffed, rubbing her face with her palm before nodding. She started to talk and coughed, clearing out her throat.

"Yeah, you're right," She said, her usual confidence returning. "Killing the vispers was way crazier than this. We are going to crush this."

## Chapter 22

We woke up the next morning and quickly got to work. After a short, tense meal, we emptied our bags of anything we weren't going to try and bring back with us. We had both gathered a good chunk of stuff, from jewelry and coins we found in homes to several books that made up a series that Tessa liked. I planned on keeping some of the stuff for myself or giving it as a gift to Olivia and Tyler, but I was planning on selling the vast majority of what I found.

My family had no massive backers waiting in the wings to support us, or to fund our businesses or schemes. I needed to generate as much money as possible to give my siblings as many chances as possible. I was stuck doing shit like the last for many years, but my siblings were the ones who would have to pull our family along.

When our packs were ready, we set out immediately, wanting to get around the outskirts of the town as quickly as possible. Compared to the distance we had been covering daily for a few weeks, it was a small stretch, but combined with the stress of being so close to so many hostile bots, it seemed to drag on forever. Still, when we arrived at what we agreed would be the best avenue of attack, we were both still brimming with energy.

"Alright... Are you ready?" Tessa asked, turning her head to look at me, both of us hiding behind a large overturned truck.

Ahead of us was a long road straight to the park at the center of town. It was still a long way away, and several automatons moved back and forth on the street. Not only that, but we

knew that there were even more hidden around and down crossing streets and alleys. We had around a mile of hostile ground to cross, with hundreds of armed and armored bots waiting to stop us.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

She nodded, and together, we stepped around our cover, starting at a walk, slowly picking up speed as we headed in. Our first target was a half-collapsed building just inside the outskirts. Quietly as possible, we scaled the pile of rubble, making it up the mound and using it as a place to jump up to the building next to it, which was still mostly intact. We managed to make it with relatively little sound, Tessa jumping first since she was much lighter on her feet.

Once we were up on the intact shop, our building-hopping journey began. Slowly but surely, we jumped from one structure to the next, making a significant amount of progress. The entire reason for coming to this side was the long string of shops, a motel, and then some sort of concrete office, all in a row that we could easily run along.

A few times, we had to work to scale a bit higher, especially between the one-floor brickwork motel and the concrete office building, which was three floors but had an already smashed window near the roof of the motel.

During our entire journey, both of us were tense, doing our absolute best to make as little noise as possible. We managed to make it past the office building by two buildings, standing on a small general store-style shop when we finally had to stop, a wide street cutting across our path that was obviously too wide to jump. We had known this going in, having spotted the gap with the drone.

We knew that charging through the town to the park in the center would only draw the attention of every bot we passed, but if we somehow managed to make it without being stopped, we would be fine. Unfortunately, the likelihood we could cross that much distance without being slowed down or stopped was too large to risk. We would have to push inward slowly but surely, destroying robots as we went in order to keep from being overwhelmed.

With a shared look, we both drew our weapons, my axe deploying from its hatchet form, the intricately detailed weapon growing to its full size. Tessa pulled an arrow from her quiver and stepped closer to the edge of the roof, quickly sighting her target. As we discussed yesterday, my job would be to keep the smaller, faster robots off of her while she focused on the slower, bulkier robots that could kill us easily with their guns if they got in range. I stood silently beside her, waiting for her to announce our presence with her first shot.

The now familiar sound of her bow firing cut through the silence, only for a metallic thump to echo through the streets, followed by a screech of static. She had nailed a distant, rusted, and lightly armored robot, whose head almost reached past the storefront it was

standing in front of. Her arrow punched through the metal-encased "head" of the large automaton, which sparked and spasmed, its legs falling out from under it as its speaker blared.

Suddenly, the whole street was alive with movement, dozens of robots shifting and turning to look at us, before, as one, they started running, heading directly for the store we were standing on. Tessa immediately turned and took aim at the second large bot, firing another arrow. I, however, wasn't paying much attention to that anymore, trusting my partner to keep the gun-wielding robots off of us. Instead, I was focused on the smaller robots as they clambered up a large truck that was smashed through the store front below us.

We were counting on the robots taking the path of least resistance. Since there was no easy way to climb up to the roof, then a three-foot jump from some sort of tow truck to the roof was the next obvious bet.

A half dozen robots reached the rusted and broken tow truck at once, clambering up the side and running along the back to leap at the edge of the store, just able to sink its robotic hands into the edge. I could hear the whirring and complaining of electrical servos as it pulled itself partially onto the roof, only to go limp and fall back after I caved its "head" in with my axe.

Unfortunately, the next robot was smaller, and it seemed that the smaller the robots were, the more agile they were, as this one was a full head shorter than me and easily cleared the gap between the truck and the roof. The first one to make the jump got greeted with a push kick that sent it falling back off the roof, slamming into the bumper of the truck. The next managed to force me back, two more quickly joining them.

The smallest of the three immediately charged, swinging what looked like a wooden table leg at me. I ducked out of the way and swung my axe up into its side, swinging one-handed so my other hand could grab its crude weapon. Sparks flew out of its rib panel, and it stumbled, giving me enough time to swing my axe back up and around to slam into its shoulder, nearly taking its head completely off. The camera mounted in its head spun and tried to focus before the few lights visible in its frame dimmed.

I didn't have time to celebrate my victory, as the other two robots were on me moments later, one of them swinging a rusted pipe at me. Instead of dodging, I let my shield tank the first hit, the red energy barrier flickering and snapping, stopping the hit and letting me shoulder check the bot. It stumbled back and slammed into another bot who had just stepped onto the roof, both of them falling off, the sound of the impact reaching me a second later.

Unfortunately, the shoulder check left me open, and I felt something slam into my side, another robot swinging a bent piece of rebar at me. Mentally thanking whoever had made the robots too stupid to realize that impaling me on the rebar would have been a lot more effective, I swung my axe around and smashed the black spike into the base of its head, the droid flopping instantly. It was like its strings had been cut, with very little resistance to my attack.

The wave of articulated metal and rusted machines continued until I had managed to destroy ten of them and Tessa another seven. As I finished off the last one, I idly pushed it off the roof, turning to Tessa.

"You notice the weak spot?" I asked, stepping away from the edge flicking out my arm, trying to work a bit of soreness out from absorbing a hit from a desperate bot.

"In the back of their neck?" Tessa asked, and I nodded. "Yeah, the only spot not armored up for the last two I took down."

We waited for a few minutes, surveying the now quiet streets waiting for a while, nervously waiting for any straggling machines to show themselves. When none did, we relaxed a little, though most of our tension remained.

"Not super useful when they are charging head first at you," I said, shaking my head. "You ready to move on?"

"I need to get my arrows first."

I nodded, and we both made our way down off of the building, both of us staying quiet as we went to each of the seven larger bots Tessa had taken down, pulling her enhanced arrows from each of them. I spent a minute trying to pull the guns from their hands but quickly discovered that not only were they welded in place, but they weren't really built in a way that a person could fire them.

When Tessa was done, we oriented ourselves down the right street and slowly headed off, creeping down the empty road, the large park a distant goal. We had made it about a third of the remaining distance when a randomly roaming bot, one only about half my height, spotted us. Tessa took it down within seconds, an arrow slamming into its chest and out its back, but it was already too late.

Another swarm of robots charged us, this time mostly smaller bots. I held them off as long as I could, giving Tessa enough time to take down the larger ranged bots before she dropped her bow on the roof of a rusted-out car and pulled out her sword. While it was extremely sharp, it wasn't enough to punch through any armor. Luckily for us, it was enough to punch through the unarmored weak spot, and the spark of electricity the weapon could discharge also stunned the machines long enough for one of us to finish them off.

We fought through the wave, as well as the final behemoth that came around a corner and sprayed us down with zap rounds. Neither of us were hit, but one took down my shield, which meant it would be down for a while. Luckily, Tessa was able to grab her bow and take it out with a few rapid shots while I played bait.

"You okay?" She asked when it had finally fallen, making her way to me and helping me to my feet.

"Yeah, the shield took the bullet for me," I assured her. "It's gonna be a while before it comes back."

She nodded and set about finding her arrows again, gathering them all quickly before we set out again. Our strategy continued, varying slightly occasionally depending on what sort of situation we found ourselves in. We smashed, crushed, and fought our way through the town, taking out droves of robots as we went. We also accumulated some wounds as we fought, though most of them were simple scrapes and bruises. I was pretty sure I had a cracked rib or three, as breathing was painful, though not hard enough to stop me. Tessa had a jagged cut along her hip, which had already stopped bleeding but would start again every time she did something strenuous. We bandaged it as best we could but ultimately decided that since it didn't really affect her movement save hurting like a bastard, it was a problem for when we got home.

Every time we survived a fight, we got closer and closer to the central park, our way home getting closer every step of the way. Soon, only a single street and the expanse of well-maintained grass were left between us. The temptation to sprint across was almost overpowering, but we somehow resisted. We stopped at the last bit of cover, a truck that had been turned on its side from a collision with a smaller car.

## Chapter 23

"So... Can I make a run for it now?" Tessa asked as we rested quietly, peeking over the edge of the sideways truck. "I mean, it would only take a few seconds."

"No. We are doing this together," I said, shaking my head. "I'm worried there is something else..."

"I thought you said you didn't think they would try to screw us over?" She asked, turning to look at me.

"I still don't," I assured her, watching the robots on the other side of the park slowly mill around aimlessly. "That doesn't mean there won't be *anything*."

"Right..." She responded, clearly not nearly as confident as I was in my assumption. "Any ideas?"

For a long moment, I was silent, studying the ground, the buildings, and everything around us, trying to spot anything unusual. As far as I could tell, there wasn't anything indicating

a hint or signal of what could happen when we tried to cross the final hundred and fifty feet or so.

"No, if there isn't anything obvious, then they clearly intended us not to find it," I finally responded in a defeated voice

"Are you saying you think there is something waiting for us... and the only way to find out what it is is to trip the trap?"

"...yes."

Tessa looked at me for a long moment before pulling away from the truck and walking around me, almost stepping out of cover. I managed to grab her and pull her back.

"Will you stop? Let's just get this over with!" She said, slapping my hand. "There's no reason to stop."

"Will you calm down for a second?" I pulling her back into cover before letting go. "I just wanted to say that we should still rush for the platform. The emergency stop will probably still shut down the robots, meaning if there is something else, we can focus on that rather than dealing with it and the bots."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then we fight until they kill us," I said, Tessa slapping my shoulder at my statement. "What, do you have a better idea? You were just about to basically do the same thing."

"Alright, fine. Are you ready?" She asked, getting ready to run around the truck and out of cover again.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Together, we stepped out of cover and ran towards the center of the large park. The second we stepped off the asphalt and onto the grass, I knew I had been right. A tremor shook the ground under our feet, almost making me trip. As I recovered, I kept going, passing Tessa, who had stopped to look back. I waved for her to keep going, making a beeline for the stone platform.

Without the need to keep pace with me, she shot forward, pouring on speed and crossing the last bit of distance to the stone platform in seconds. Without pause, she jumped up the steps to the shutdown button, slapping it immediately.

As we were running towards the center, dozens of alarms sounded around the park, robots noticing us from almost every angle. Immediately, they began to run towards us, the

smaller ones almost reaching the grass while the larger ones were just stepping out from around buildings. When Tessa slapped the shut-off, all of them collapsed. Together as one, all of them stumbled forward, their forward momentum causing them to slap and tumble along the ground. Tessa jumped and shouted in excitement, only to stop and focus back on me and the growing mound in the dirt between us. By now, what had been the occasional tremor had shifted into a constant rumbling that started collapsing the already weak nearby buildings.

The mound under the grass continued to grow until the grass couldn't cover it anymore, and it tore away, sliding off the metal underneath to reveal what had been hiding. A sizeable mechanical monster about twice the size of the largest robot we had seen so far. It was quadrupedal, shifting and moving with smooth joints, and looked vaguely canine, its legs and head shaped in a similar way as a wolf. It also had jaws filled with metallic teeth, each of its feet armed with sharp-looking claws.

It looked as if someone combined a wolf with an advanced piece of construction machinery, the type nobles sent out to build their business fronts in Outer York City. As we watched, both of us frozen in shock, the rising platform finished its movement, the large canine robot now fully exposed. The massive machine shook the dirt off itself with fluid motion, telling me this was *not* a clunky, low-quality bot like we had been facing. This was built with much more advanced stuff.

"Run!" I shouted, shoving Tessa to get her going, following after her as she sprinted away.

I could feel the slow tremors as the robot shifted its feet, knowing it was watching us and *letting us escape*. We both dashed around the corner of a random brick structure with long-broken display windows in the front. We kept running, moving past wrecked cars and disabled robots, both of us almost stumbling and falling as the massive robot let out a long, mechanical howl, the sound making the broken glass around us vibrate.

Once the long howl stopped, we could hear and *feel* the massive robot chasing after us. Tessa grabbed my arm and pulled me into an alleyway, which crossed to another road. We kept running, the electronic growls and barking of the canine-esque machine echoing from behind us as it tried to follow us, eventually running around to find a different way.

"We are going to have to kill it!" I said, still running after Tessa. "We can't outrun it!"

"No shit!" She shouted back.

It was only about ten seconds later that the quadruped robot found us again, jumping over a burnt out truck and skidding on the ground, cutting off the road we were running after. In one smooth motion, Tessa drew her bow, nocked an arrow, and fired, the enhanced arrow flying to and punching through one of the machine's eye sensors, making them yelp and bark in simulated pain.



Seeing it reel back from something as if it was capable of feeling pain, I immediately turned back and charged at it. Tessa shouted as she saw me turn, but I just kept running.

"Keep hitting it!" I shouted, the road shaking as I crossed back through the distance. "Try and take its other eye!"

I reached its feet just as it settled down, thankfully still focused on Tessa. I swung my axe, the enhanced blade punching through the armor on its inner leg, cutting through whatever was underneath. The canine-like machine reacted with a deep, electronic growl but was forced to move and avoid Tessa's arrow rather than attack me directly. It dipped its head as she shot, giving me a chance to attack its leg again, heaving a strike that slammed into just the same spot before yanking the axe free.

As I slammed my axe into it a second time, the bottom quarter of the leg, the foot, and a bit higher went completely limp, sparks shooting out from the "wound" in its leg. It limped and spun, attempting to chomp at me, its metal jaws sounding like a ragged pair of shears before slamming shut with a mighty clang. I just managed to jump clear onto and beyond a car. Its jaws slammed down around the car's front end as it jumped back again, tearing through it before shaking its head loose.

It growled in frustration and climbed over the car, its frame crumpling under its massive weight as it limped towards me, its leg dripping black oil. I turned to run, circling around a large wreck. I could hear Tessa firing arrows at it, three shots slamming into the armor on its back, all three penetrating but not doing anything.

Finally, her third shot managed to slam into its neck, causing it to flinch, slamming against the storefront it was walking past. I turned and once again rushed it, this time holding up my hand and activating my flashbang glove. A massive flash of light was blasting out, followed by a gigantic concussive blast, the sound hurting my ears.

True to my theory, the metal canine reacted as if it were alive, reeling back and yipping, lashing out with its "uninjured" paw. It smashed the side of a truck but missed me, letting me hack at the limb unimpeded, getting two swings in before it reacted and jumped away.

The ground shook when it landed, and a partially wrecked building about two dozen feet away completely collapsed from the shaking. I charged after it once more, getting ready to stun it again, when it suddenly jumped forward, attacking me directly. I managed to just barely lift my axe up and get it between us as it swiped at me, which was the only reason the impact didn't break any bones. It still lifted me off my feet and threw me backward, sailing through the air until I slammed into the side of a van. The van crumpled behind me, its window shattering from the force. The impact rattled me worse than the blow, my head slamming into the car hard enough to see stars.

"Leon!"

I could hear Tessa shouting, and through blurry vision, I could see an arrow hit the mechanical wolf's nose with no reaction. It seemed determined to take me out, making its way toward me. It was almost on me when suddenly Tessa leaped over the van, definitely using her jump boots to add extra height. She landed the massive robot's back, diving forward to reach its head and neck. Her hand flashed, and she slammed a knife into its head, the blade, her safety knife, cutting quickly through the armor, carving a massive chunk of it off completely.

The wolf roared in anger and pain, tossing its head around, trying to dislodge Tessa as she effortlessly cut into the armor-plating. I stood up, leaning against the van behind me until my feet were under me before charging with my own shout, throwing caution to the wind. I could see Tessa drop her knife, the charge undoubtedly drained as she drew her sword and plunged it into the mess of exposed machinery. Sparks zapped out around its head, the whole body jerking as I slammed my axe over and over again into its legs until finally it collapsed.

I ran out from under the massive metal construct and attacked its neck, hacking away until after a half dozen strikes, it went completely limp. Oil, hydraulic fluid and some kind of coolant all sprayed out from the deep "wounds" the both of us cut into him, covering us both. Eventually, my energy ran out, and I collapsed backward, the dull aches turning into more persistent and debilitating pain.

"Tessa?" I called out, slowly walking my way around the massive "corpse," looking for my partner. "Tessa, you alright?"

"Yeah... I'm fine." She responded, standing up from where she had fallen off of the robot dog. "You okay?"

"Fuck no, but I'll survive," I responded, almost collapsing before she darted forward, helping me stay upright. "Thanks."

"You sure it's dead?" She asked, looking back at the machine's head.

"I nearly decapitated it," I said, "It's dead."

Slowly but surely, we walked away from the mechanical corpse, making our way to the center park. As the adrenaline faded, the pain from being slapped across the street got worse, and it was clear that Tessa hadn't gotten off scot-free either. Still, we supported each other as best we could, eventually making it back to the grassy park. As we climbed to the top of the platform, we stopped and sat down, facing back toward the town.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked as we recovered.

"Yeah... you gonna bring your axe with you?"

"It should be fine," I said with a shrug. "It's nice and small when it's a hatchet."

She nodded and for a long moment we sat in silence, looking back at what we had survived. After a few minutes had gone by, I slowly stood, wincing as I straightened up and offered Tessa my hand.

"C'mon, time to go home."

She looked up at me and nodded, taking my hand and letting me pull her up. Wordlessly, we turned back to the two boxes before I helped her climb into hers. Once it was shut, I could hear it locking up tight, sealing up to protect her from moving from this reality to mine. I quickly made my way to the other box, climbed inside, and shut the door, letting it seal around me.

As far as I could remember, it felt identical to the box I had arrived in, all the way down to the viewscreen. After a few seconds, I stood inside the box, and a countdown appeared in the bottom left corner. Without any fanfare, it started counting down from ten.

The familiar red lighting appeared almost instantly, arcing and spinning around the box, this time in a wider arch that enveloped both Tessa and me. It spun faster and faster, obscuring our view of the park and the town past that, until all I could see was the red energy. Suddenly, with only seconds left, the box vibrating constantly, the screen went black. I could feel the box falling, and while I forced myself to breathe calmly, I realized that with everything I had talked about, I had never explained to Tessa what this felt like.

Before I could think of anything past, that feeling disappeared, and suddenly, the view screen was of the same lab space I had left behind months ago. Smoke partially obscured the room, but it soon faded. After a few more seconds, there was a beep, and the screen blinked green. I could hear and feel the box as it unlocked itself, the door opening just a fraction of an inch, letting me push it open completely.

## Chapter 24

I stepped out of my box, looking to my right to see Tessa stepping out of hers, looking around, her eyes wide. If I didn't know her so well at this point, I would have missed the nervousness she was doing her best to hide. Before I could say or do anything, a loud tone echoed through the empty lap space, and suddenly, it wasn't so empty anymore.

Dozens of people rushed into the room, all dressed in hazardous environment gear. They made a beeline for us, making Tessa and I flinch, instinctively reaching for our weapons. I managed to stop with just a flinch, but Tessa had her hand on her pistol before she slowly pulled it away.

"Welcome home, Leon! And Tessa, welcome to your new home!" A familiar voice called out.

I turned and looked up to see the same observation room as before, with Ilbryen standing front and center, giving me a wave. There was a whole group of people behind him, several of whom were directing camera drones. Seems like we still had an audience.

"These fine folk are going to make sure you're alright, then you and Tessa are going to need a good decontamination," He explained with a smile. "When you're all done with that, we have some people who would like to see you. Have fun!"

The people in protective gear scanned us for a minute or so, making sure our most recent injuries weren't going to act up. When they were done, they listed off our injuries and gave us each a large shot through a device similar to the enhancing serums. Almost immediately, the pain faded, and both Tessa and I let out a groan of relief. One of the people scanning us chuckled.

"Sounds like the painkillers kicked in," He said, folding up his scanner and stepping back out of my personal space. "I suggest you take it easy for about twenty-four hours while the medicine does its job. Both of you have a couple of hairline fractures each and some internal bruising, and Leon, you have three broken ribs, but beyond that you're both fine. As long as you don't get hit again for a day or so it should all heal up nicely."

I could only nod as he quickly walked away, all but two of the people following him out. It was beyond strange to be around so many people, a sort of uneasiness creeping around the back of my head. As the two remaining staff gestured for us to follow them, I turned to look at Tessa.

"You alright?"

"Yeah... it's a lot to handle once..." She admitted, looking around constantly, trying to take in every new thing.

"Just stay close," I said, and she looked back at me, giving me a serious nod. She clearly had no intention of leaving my side anytime soon.

We continued to follow our guides before eventually ending up in a room with a series of cylindrical tubes. Two of them were open, with a floating cart next to each and a privacy screen between them both.

"You'll both need to strip down, put your stuff on these carts and stand in the decontamination vessels for about five minutes," One of the people explained. "We will decontaminate your stuff and provide you with new clothes. Don't worry. Once everything is clean we will send it to Mr. Draver's home. It will probably beat you there."

The two guides left, leaving us alone in the room. We stepped on either side of the privacy screen and quickly stripped down. While we hadn't exactly been dancing naked in front of each other for the past three or so months, we had gotten used to having each other nearby, so any awkwardness that might have floated between us had long since faded.

"You think we will actually get this stuff back?" Tessa asked as I pulled off my jacket and folded it.

"Yeah, nobles don't steal," I explained, working on my armor next. "They might trick you into giving up ownership of stuff, but Ilbryen said it was ours, so it's ours."

When all our clothes, filled packs, and gear were off and on the carts, we both climbed into the tubes. We stood inside for a moment before the door slid shut, me inside. Even in the enclosed space, I could feel some of the stress slowly leaking from my body. I was finally home, Tessa was with me, my family was safe, and I didn't have to worry about anything for a while.

Suddenly, the tubes vibrated and a harsh light blasted through from the top. I could feel something moving from inside the tube walls, a scanner or something. When the movement or whatever it was finally, a series of nozzles were revealed around the interior, all facing me.

"Son of a-

The nozzles sprayed me down with harsh, cold liquid that was way too green to be water. The spray reached *every* corner of my body, before suddenly switching to blasts of dry air that quickly dried the not water off of me. When it was done, I could hear Tessa cursing loudly in her own tube.

When the tubes opened back up, the floating carts carrying our stuff were gone, replaced by one carrying a new set of clothes. A simple pair of gray slacks, a white button-up t-shirt, a black suit jacket, and a pair of fancy loafers combined into a sort of business casual outfit that I should probably get used to wearing. Of course, once it was all on, it slowly shaped itself around me until it fit perfectly, adjusting to the perfect temperature as well.

"These clothes are even more comfortable than the stuff we found in the white crates," Tessa said from the other side of the privacy screen.

"Probably more durable as well," I responded with a shrug, even though she couldn't see me.

As I pulled on my loafers, Tessa leaned against my side of the privacy screen, running a comb through her mostly dried hair. She was dressed in a similar outfit to mine, though her pants had a bit of flare at the ends, and her jacket was a dark blue. She was also in some comfortable but stylish sandals.

"Better than the armored stuff?" She asked.

"Wouldn't be surprised. No reason to hold back on the good stuff now," I said, standing up and giving Tessa a good look. "...You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just focusing on staying calm," She said with a rigid nod. "I'm sure I'm going to break down eventually. Just... don't let me get overwhelmed?"

"Yeah, I've got you," I said with a nod, squeezing her shoulder. "We-"

Before I could say anything, the only door into the room opened up, and Ilbryen stepped inside. He was smiling, and he spread his arms out the moment he spotted us.

"Oh, it is good to see you two with my own eyes!" He said, walking up to me and giving me a hug. "You two have done so well, better than we could have ever hoped for!"

I gave Tessa a wide-eyed look, completely caught off guard by the noble's sudden affection. I hesitantly patted his back before he stepped back. For a moment, I thought he would try and hug Tessa, which I was pretty sure would end badly, but it seemed that that had occurred to Ilbryen as well.

"I am so glad that you both made it back, safe and sound," He said, reaching out to shake Tessa's hand, putting both of his on hers, and smiling. "How did you like Fenrir? A good challenge, right?"

"The wolfbot?" Tessa asked, looking stunned at his. "The thing that almost killed us?"

"Almost, that's the key!" He said, seemingly missing her rising anger. "Our merchandising department is already having a field day with him! Oh, right, I'm sure you both would like to get home and rest, and here I am gushing! Well, come on, let's get a move on!"

Tessa opened her mouth to shout at the flamboyant noble, who had already turned to the door. I quickly stepped between them, putting my hand on Tessa's mouth.

"Tessa, I know," I said, shaking my head. "But he won't understand, it's not worth it."

She pulled my hand off her face, thankfully more angry at Ilbryen than at me.

"I... god, you warned me, but how could he... What was he thinking?"

"That we signed a contract, so how could we not be excited about the money being made?" I guessed with a shrug. "Even if we won't be seeing any of it directly, the fact that we are part of a project that brings in that much cash is prestigious. It's just another type of currency for them."

Before she could respond, I could hear Ilbryen's voice calling down the hallway for us. I nodded to the door, and Tessa let out a deep breath before taking the lead and walking out into the hall.

We followed Ilbryen down the hallway, passing by the space where we had landed back in this world, continuing on until we reached an elevator. We stepped inside and the door closed behind us, perky elevator music playing as we rose up through the building. Ilbryen hummed softly, following along with the elevator music while Tessa visibly struggled to keep her cool. When the doors opened with a ding, Ilbryen stepped to the side and gestured for us to go on without him.

"Oh, I'm sure I would just get in the way," He said when I gave him a look. "Just do me a favor and let me know when you leave."

Resisting the urge to say we wanted to leave right then, I walked out onto the new floor, Tessa following behind me. I absently noted that the elevator door closed behind us with another ding before I was hit with two fleshy missiles.

"Welcome home, Leon!"

I couldn't help but laugh, catching both of my siblings in my arms easily, spinning around to burn off some of the energy from them jumping on me. I could see Mom standing not far behind them, looking like she was about to join my siblings.

"It's good to see you guys. I missed all of you so much," I said, gently putting them both down.

Both of them had clearly grown. Tyler gaining a few inches was unsurprising. He was at the age where you couldn't turn around without him adding an inch. Olivia's growth was a pleasant surprise, her body recovering and thriving from her ordeal. Both of them looked good, healthy, and happy.

"We missed you too!" Tyler said, while Mom finally stopped holding back and gave me a crushing hug.

I mentally thanked the worker who had given me the painkillers earlier.

"I'm home, Mom," I said, hugging her back. "I told you I would make it."

"I'm so glad, sweetie," She responded, her voice choked up from crying. "Oh, I am so glad."

It took a minute or so for my mom to finally let me go, wiping her eyes with a small cloth. She turned to Tessa, giving her a watery smile.

"It's good to finally meet you Tessa," She said, walking up to her and giving her just as big of a hug. "Thank you so much for taking care of my boy."

"Of course, Mrs. Draver," She said, happily returning the hug. "He kept me alive just as much as I did."

"She is staying with us, at least until she gets used to this world," I said.

"I know, sweetie. I couldn't bear to watch your show, but Ilbryen informed me we would most likely be having her as a guest," she explained, pulling back from her hug and smiling at Tessa. "We have plenty of room. You can stay as long as you like. Coming up from being a Lowie was a shock enough, I couldn't imagine how you're feeling."

"It's... a lot," She admitted, looking over her shoulder at me. "I..."

As she looked back at me, her eyes caught onto something, and her voice trailed off. I turned back to see that the far wall was one massive window featuring a massive portion of the city. I watched as Tessa wordlessly stepped closer, all the way until her hands were pressing on the glass. Just as I remembered, the city was filled with hundreds of flying cars, people, and other things. The buildings were decorated with hanging plants and beautiful artwork, some of which moved and emoted. It was incredibly impressive, and I couldn't imagine how insane it looked to someone who grew up in the wreck of a world that died seventy years ago.

As she watched, my mom put her head on my shoulder while Olivia walked forward and took Tessa's hand. The shocked woman looked down at my sister, who smiled encouragingly up at her.

"Welcome to Inner York City," I said. "Welcome to your new home."

## Chapter 25

It took Tessa a while to finally step away from the window and join us on a nearby sofa. During that time, Mom called for our company car and texted Ilbryen that we would be leaving soon. He responded with a series of animated images that ended with a thumbs-up, which was more than enough for me.

Stepping out of the building and into the waiting hover car triggered another bout of wide-eyed staring from Tessa. She looked like she was trying to take in every angle at once, which made my mom nervous as she moved around on the open-air, extended platform. It



would have made me nervous, too, if I didn't know that with her enhancements, she could do backflips in the small space and never even slip.

The city was as impressive as ever, even more so without the tinted glass between us and the open air. The staggered construction, combined with how high up we were, meant that all we could see were rooftops and open space, with green, plant-covered bridges connecting everything.

"How does the air feel so clean?" Tessa asked, taking a deep breath. "I thought cities had pollution and smog."

"I don't know, but I can tell you that the air is terrible outside golden cities," I explained. "The whole family had to get treated for pollution exposure when we first left."

After a few minutes, Mom dragged us both into the hover car, which was sealed shut after we climbed in. I couldn't help but chuckle at Tessa, her face pressed up against the glass, watching the other cars and a few people flew by. I could already tell by her face that she would eventually be joining the ones flying without a vehicle.

It didn't take long for us to make it back home, the large, luxurious apartment greeting us with a friendly chime. The house was mostly like I remembered, save for the slightly more lived-in feel. I could see our pictures displayed all over the walls, with books, toys, and other stuff tucked here or stacked there. It was definitely clean, but it didn't feel as... sterile as it did before I left. It still felt big, even with Tessa and I having spent so many nights inside normal homes. The open architecture and judicious use of glass windows only made it feel even bigger. Mom ended up giving Tessa a tour, which was also a bit of a tour for me, as plenty had changed since I had left. Oliva had turned her room into a combination library and garden, with books filling four large bookcases and plants filling the remaining free space.

Before her treatment, the dust from the books and the pollen from the flowers would have been enough to kill her.

Tyler's room looked like a toy store, which, considering that most of them had probably been free, wasn't surprising. He had racks, display cases, and tables laden with toys of all shapes and sizes. Oddly enough, a lot of the action figures, models, and more seemed to be on display rather than temporarily put away. Mom explained that when Tyler realized he could get toys for free, he got hundreds of them delivered to the house. He opened up every single one, stacked and played with them for minutes before getting bored with most of them. Even as full of stuff as his room was, she assured me they had returned even more.

After showing Tessa where she would be sleeping, the guest room decorated with some pictures, and a large media screen that was currently set to a scene view of a lakehouse, we headed to the kitchen. Mom apologized that she couldn't cook for us, but they hadn't really known when exactly we would be returning, so they had spent all day waiting for us.

"Mom, having you guys waiting for us there was worth some takeout," I said, giving her a hug. "Did you guys find any new restaurants while I was gone?"

Tyler immediately suggested we get Mexi, some sort of Noble twist on Mexican food. He promised me it was amazing, but I waved him off.

"Sorry bud, but this is Tessa's first meal here," I pointed out, his eyes going wide. "It's gotta be really special."

About twenty minutes later, we had a massive stack of pizza delivered to our house, a robotic drone dropping it off at our doorstep before zipping off, lit up by the purple glow of antigrav tech. We ended up getting six small pizzas so we could get a variety, letting Tessa try as many types as possible.

We quickly put out plates, drinks, and napkins. Olivia rushed from her room, a streak of dirt on her cheek and hands from tending to her plants, having neglected them when they were waiting for me. Mom fussed over her for a moment before we all finally sat down around the table.

For a moment, we all watched Tessa, who was looking down at a slice of plain pizza with wonder in her eyes. After a moment, she looked up at me, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm sorry, how am I not supposed to be amazed that you just type some stuff in on one of those chips, and food just shows up at your door?" She asked, shaking her head. "And it smells amazing..."

As she talked, she grabbed the pizza and took a bite, purposely trying to come off as nonchalant. The second she started to chew, the flavor spread in her mouth, her eyes going wide as she all but jammed the small slice into her mouth. I couldn't help but laugh at her various noises of appreciation, even as she quickly grabbed another one.

"Oh my god, this is so fucking good," She said with her mouth full, getting another laugh from me.

Still chuckling at her, I joined her in eating, holding back my own sounds of appreciation. I had missed food like this so much at the start of my trip, but somewhere along the line, I had forgotten just how good food could be. About five minutes into eating, I slowly realized that my family was staring at Tessa rather than eating. I looked up at my mom, who, with a raised eyebrow, reached down, took a napkin and handed it to me.

"Sweetie, I know the last few months have been rough...but maybe slow down before you choke?" She suggested looking a bit worried.

I looked at her for a moment, a bit confused, before I looked down at the boxes of food. A bit of math and suddenly I realized that Tessa and I had eaten a lot more than I had realized. I swallowed what I had been chewing on before taking the napkin and wiping my hands.

"Sorry, Mom.... I guess my brain hasn't realized we aren't still in Tessa's world," I said, looking at Tessa, who was blushing a bit, wiping her face with a napkin. "Haven't really been watching out for table manners."

"I know sweetie, I just don't want you to choke or make yourself sick."

I nodded, and Tessa and I continued eating, this time both at a much slower pace and with much better manners. When we were finished, I stuck around the kitchen to help Mom clean up while Tyler and Oliva dragged Tessa out to the greenery-covered bridge that connected our home to our neighbors.

"How has everything been?" I asked as I leaned against the counter, drying plates as my mother washed them. "I mean, how have things really been?"

"It was... tough at first," She admitted, drying one plate and accepting another. "For a week or so, Tyler was having a hard time finding things to do once the excitement wore off. He was used to having a whole megatower of people to spend time with. Between working with a tutor and the move..."

I watched through the window as Tyler showed Tessa some sort of toy, a wand of some sort that he was pointing at a glowing ball. The wand let him maneuver and move it around, and Tyler whipped it into the air, the ball disappearing upward with a faint crack.

"What changed?"

"There is an entertainment center down the road where a lot of kids in the area go," She answered with a smile. "It's nice. There are a lot of noble toys that he seemed to enjoy, and he made some friends. Olivia, on the other hand..."

My sister seemed to be content watching Tyler and Tessa play, the latter making some impressive catches as the former hurled the lightly glowing ball into the air.

"What's wrong?" I asked, tearing my eyes away when I noticed she had trailed off. "Her issue isn't coming back, is it? We can call Ilbryen, and he-"

"No, no, nothing like that. She just seems content to work on her garden and plants, watching the city sometimes," Mom explained, drying her hands and smiling as she watched Tessa and my siblings play. "I've tried to encourage her to find some friends. Apparently, she has some online friends she talks to, but beyond them..."

"Has she asked about traveling?" I asked, my mom turning to give me a confused look.

"Traveling? What do you mean?"

"She was obsessed with watching media about foreign places, whether it was a streamer or a documentary," I explained. "I was certain I would come home, and her first question would be if she could come with me next time."

"And you would say?" Mom asked, giving me a harsh look.

"No, of course," I assured her, shaking my head. "But she might enjoy traveling to other golden cities, maybe seeing some restored historical sites? She's seen so many shows about them at this point she probably knows them better than the guides. Who knows, maybe it would help her come out of her shell."

We continued to talk as we finished cleaning, eventually heading outside to sit with Olivia. Of course, I got roped into playing along with Tessa and Tyler, the latter of whom was clearly enjoying the challenge of getting Tessa to leap around and catch the ball. Tessa wasn't even sweating.

Eventually, as the sun set we returned inside. Tyler was sent off to bed, quickly followed by Olivia. When they were gone, my mom, Tessa, and I sat around the island in our kitchen, talking about finally being home and sharing a drink, the first alcohol I had had since leaving.

"Ilbryen wanted to drag you off to some sort of event immediately," Mom said, taking a small sip of her wine. "He eventually agreed to let you unwind for a few days."

"Event?" I asked, not sure what that could mean. "Did he say what kind?"

"A meet and greet of some kind, one with some big wig nobles," She explained. "I was very cross with him when he told me that plan."

"Do... you talk to him often?"

"Well... he would keep me updated on how you two were doing," She admitted, shaking her head. "I'm sorry sweetie, but I couldn't watch! I tried, and I couldn't stop crying."

"Mom, it's okay. I'm glad you didn't watch," I assured her, stepping around the counter and giving her a big hug. "It wasn't fun, and I wouldn't wish that on you. Trust me, I know how terrible watching it was firsthand."

She sniffed before looking at me, watering eyes and tilting her head in confusion. I just gestured to Tessa.

"There were plenty of times when she needed to do something by herself or when her mods were better suited for something than me. Watching her putting herself at risk while I just watched sucked."

Understanding colored my mom's face, nodding before resting her head on my shoulder. For a long moment, we stood in the kitchen, sharing a hug, before I pulled away slightly, noticing that Tessa was walking away, heading to the living room. I looked back at Mom when she pulled away the rest of the way.

"Go, she needs support," She said, nodding towards Tessa, before wiping her cheek. "Go on, you being home is all that I need, sweetie. The house feels different already."

I nodded, giving her one more hug and kissing her cheek before leaving the kitchen and heading to the living room. I came around and dropped onto the couch beside her, settling into the incredibly comfy seat.

"How are you doing?"

"How often are you going to ask me that?" She asked, a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice.

"Probably a lot."

"It's gonna get old quickly," She pointed out.

"Maybe."

"Ass."

After a long moment of silence, she leaned her head on my shoulder, and we sat there on the couch late into the night. We didn't talk, but when we eventually went to bed, she thanked me with a hug before heading off to the guest room.

## Chapter 26

Eventually, we both did go to bed, tiredly climbing off the couch and making our way to our rooms. Unfortunately, even though I was lying down on the most comfortable bed I had ever been in, I struggled to fall asleep. I tossed and turned despite being very comfortable and at the perfect temperature. It wasn't until Tessa knocked on my door and quickly stepped into my room that I realized what the problem was.

It was too quiet.

There were no distant screeches, no wind, no metal creaking, no reassuring *breathing* that told me I wasn't alone. Tessa closed my door behind herself and made her way to my bed, stopping just beside it. I could tell from the look on her face that she was having the same issue I was. After a moment, I nodded, sliding to the side and giving her space to climb in. She laid down and put her head on my spare pillow, facing away from me. I immediately felt safer, which told me I was so used to her being around that I was overly attached.

Putting that issue off for later, I turned on my chip and found an ambient noise machine, scrolling through the options before selecting jungle sounds. I turned the volume down low before putting my chip back down on my nightstand and settling back into bed. I could feel Tessa next to me despite the fact that we weren't touching. Almost immediately, I could feel myself starting to drift off, quickly falling asleep.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of a heavy knock on my door, this time louder and clearly intending to wake me up.

"Leon, wake up! I made breakfast, and I can't find Tessa," She said while making the stereotypical parent move of opening the door and stepping into my room before she was even finished talking.

She froze while Tessa and I bolted upright, both of us scrambling for a weapon, slowly stopping when we realized where we were. My mom blushed and opened her mouth to assumedly apologize, but I raised a hand to stop her.

"It's very hard to sleep alone when you're used to always having someone around," I explained.

My mom's face softened, and she nodded in understanding.

"You're right, sweetie. I suppose I should have seen this coming," She admitted. "I was the same way when your father passed. Just... try and keep it from your brother. Your sister would understand, but your brother... well, I assume you wouldn't want that to spread to your boss and job."

A minute or so later, both Tessa and Mom were gone, and I hopped into the shower attached to my room. It was an incredibly soothing experience, with massage jets and steam that seemed very over the top but that I couldn't deny was very nice. After that, I got dressed in simple jeans and a T-shirt, pulling a simple black jacket over that. After a few minutes of thinking, I finally decided to clip my axe, in hatchet form, to my hip. I felt wrong even trying to leave the room without it, and it was better than putting on my entire combat outfit.

I made my way to the kitchen to find Tessa waiting for me, sitting at the table, already eating some pancakes. I could see she had her pistol clipped to her hip and her sword on the other side. It was a bit much, but I was happy she was at least not carrying her bow. Besides, her instincts were even more deeply ingrained than mine were. I doubt she would ever feel truly comfortable without some sort of weapon on her person.

I barely had time to sit down beside her before Mom put a stack of pancakes in front of me, walking around and sitting across the table from the both of us. She took a sip of her coffee, watching us eat.

"Do you have any plans for today?" She finally asked. "Tyler and Olivia are already off to classes. They will be back later today so you have all morning and early afternoon."

"We need clothes and other necessities," I answered. "I'm still wearing my lowie clothes because I never really had the chance to go shopping before I left. We both need a new wardrobe, plus whatever else Tessa wants to get."

My partner looked at me, shrugging with a mouthful of bacon, getting a chuckle out of my mom. She also looked a bit nervous about the idea of going out and *doing* things, but she hid that a lot better, at least enough that she might have hidden it from my mom.

I saw right through her, of course.

We finished our breakfast slowly, making sure not to default to our quick, manners-free eating style. When we were done, I spent a few minutes looking up a few stores that looked like they would have stuff we would wear. After compiling a list, we headed out.

Shopping was an interesting experience. Most of the stores were simple, automated locations where you would enter into a small room, one of dozens. There, you would scroll through a selection of clothes on a huge media screen. After selecting what you wanted and in what size, it would be delivered through a precise little conveyor system only a few seconds later. If you tried it on and liked it, you put it in your bag. If you didn't like it, you fed it back into the machine to get shredded. I was pretty sure the clothes were being made on demand because each one was warm when it arrived, and I could faintly hear the sound of machinery through the wall.

There was even a station to make alterations to outfits you liked, but that didn't fit in some way.

Tessa and I spent about an hour in each store, ultimately visiting three before going home. Most of that time was spent trying to convince the selection machine to give us clothes that weren't over the top, embedded with technology, or some strange mix of noncomplementary colors, all of which seemed to be popular among Nobles our age.

The most annoying part of the whole experience was that if I was correct and the machines were making the clothes on demand, then there was no reason to go to multiple stores at all. The machines at each location were exactly the same down to the brand, just themed differently depending on the store, which meant any one of them could have made all of the clothes we ended up getting.

When our clothes shopping was finally done, we stopped by a few other stores. I got Tessa a chip, the same type I had so I could help her use it and a few other odds and ends. When we were done, we picked up some take out, eating our lunch on a greenery-filled terrace in one of the many public areas around the city.

In total, we spent a hundred credits, an astronomically low number considering how much we bought. Tessa didn't really catch on since she wasn't used to using money to buy things, but every time we walked out of a store without paying anything, I could feel myself growing more and more upset. I had learned that the cost of living in a golden city was ridiculously low, but this was mind-boggling. Meanwhile, as a lowie, we had to spend almost every credit that we didn't spend on Olivia, just keeping everyone fed.

We were just about finished eating when I got a call from Ibryen, informing me that he would be stopping by our apartment to talk. We promised to be there, and both Tessa and I started to rush through the rest of our lunch. Just as we were packing things up, a woman stopped in front of our bench. She looked around our age, but with the various de-aging and life-extension treatments available to nobles, she could have been ancient for all I knew. She was wearing a sundress that slowly shifted between blue and gold, as well as a hat that only covered half of her head. Her hair was electric blue, and her eyes kept changing color in time with her dress.

"Excuse me... But are you Leon and Tessa?" She asked, her eyes shifting wide in surprise. "I saw you a few minutes ago and... I had to check."

"Uh... yeah, we are," I said, looking around nervously. "How did you know?"

"How did- how could I not?!" She asks, sounding excited. "Oh gosh, I can't believe it's you! I've seen every episode and- Oh! Hold on a second! I ran back to my house and got this!"

She frantically reached down into a simple shopping bag that she was carrying, pulling out some sort of model, still in its box. It took me a long second to realize that it was a model of a visper.

"The mechanical wolf model is coming out in a few days, but I really liked this one. The mutant models just seem so much more lifelike than the robotic models," She explained excitedly before blushing as she held it out to me. "Could... you sign it?"



I stared at her for a long moment, my mind grinding to a halt. I looked down at the model, idly noting that there was a small model axe, a replica of my original weapon, alongside the visper.

"I... I don't have a-" I started, when the woman suddenly held out a marker. "Pen... Uh yeah, sure."

I quickly signed the box, and the woman looked nervously at Tessa, holding out the box. Reluctantly, clearly not understanding fully what was going on, Tessa took the marker from me and signed the box as well. The woman squealed excitedly, and for a moment, it looked like she was going to try and hug me, but she thankfully decided not to.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She said happily before looking around. "Umm... I guess I will leave you alone. You seemed to be about to leave... umm... welcome back!"

Before I could say anything, she quickly walked away and left us alone, both Tessa and I more than a bit confused. She looked over her shoulder, and when she saw we were watching her, she put her head down and walked away faster, a red blush spreading on her face.

"Okay... what was that?" Tessa asked, turning to me.

"That... was a fan," I said, shaking my head. "They watched our... show."

"Oh... and we signed the little toy to what, show that she met us?"

"No. Well... actually, yeah, kinda. It also makes the model more significant. Worth more as well, as long as people care about who signed it..." I said, trailing off as I looked around. "I guess we were bound to find one eventually. I'm just surprised it happened so quickly. We should get out of here."

"Yeah..."

When we arrived back home, we had barely sat down when Ilbryen arrived. He smiled and was about to say something when he spotted some of our shopping bags.

"Did... you two go out shopping?" He asked, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, I never got a chance to replace my wardrobe when we first moved in, and Tessa needed all new stuff anyway," I explained. "Why?"

"Leon! You need bodyguards, security, drivers! My god, how did you make it through the swarm?"

"Swarm? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Please, you must have been recognized."

"Well, yeah, once. A young woman wanted something signed," I explained. "But-" "You went out in public, and only one person recognized you?" The noble man asked incredulously, looking bewildered. "That is incredible! You even went out with your weapons on your hip! A miracle!"

"Ilbryen, that's ridiculous. I mean, sure, people watched, but it couldn't have been that big of a deal."

For a long pause, Ilbryen said nothing, staring at me with wide eyes before finally starting to laugh, a deep belly laugh that I was pretty sure he was purposely exaggerating to be dramatic. When he stopped, wiping his eyes as if he had been crying.

"Not a big deal? Leon, why do you think we offered Tessa the same deal we offered you?" He asked, shaking his head with a wide grin. "When we made our offer, your live show was the most popular show my company had produced in three years. Now it's seven! Your live stream regularly had millions of concurrent viewers, and your curated and edited episodes each blow past that in terms of downloads! You and Tessa are perhaps the two greatest celebrities of the decade!"

## Chapter 27

I gawped at Ilbryen for a full thirty seconds before I recovered enough to actually say something. Tessa was even more shocked, considering she didn't even have a reference to that many people or even anything remotely close.

"Are- are you serious?" I asked, staring at him. "There's no way..."

"Oh, I assure you, Leon. I am *quite* serious," He said with a smirk. "We are already looking for more people to add to the roster. Your journey was an experiment, and it succeeded past our wildest expectations. Even better, there is plenty of room for improvement!"

"That's... Holy shit," I said, dropping back down to the couch, not sure when I actually stood up. "We had no idea..."

"Do we get a raise?" Tessa asked, ever the pragmatist.

"Absolutely!" Ilbryen said excitedly. "This project has been fast-tracked so hard we are burning money and favors to keep up. The company is making an incredible amount of money

off of merchandise, advertising, and direct viewership sales. So much so that I've been given the go-ahead to double your rewards per world traveled, including the payout from the previous adventure, as well as a substantial increase in your monthly salary."

"What about Tessa?" I asked.

"Tessa will be receiving the same increases but will only be receiving five million for her participation in your last adventure," the noble man explained, looking apologetic and raising his hands. "Understand she wasn't going to receive *anything* for that beforehand. They desperately want to keep you guys happy and eager to cross to the next world, but they still need to get a lot of this stuff approved."

I sat there, leaning back on the couch, trying to wrap my mind around what Ilbryen was saying. I immediately assumed that the increase in pay was peanuts compared to how much money they were making, but I understood I really didn't have much of a leg to stand on at this point, not when I was already locked in. Plus, it was hard to complain when we were making so much money already.

"Split mine with Tessa," I said after a long, stretching silence. "So we are both making seven and a half million for the last trip."

"Leon, shut up. I don't care about the money, and five million is more than enough," She said, slapping my shoulder. "Getting out of that hell hole was worth way more than an extra five. As long as we are making the same amount on the next one."

She gave Ilbryen a hard look, the noble nodding emphatically.

"Of course, absolutely."

"Then it's fine. Besides, that money isn't yours. It is for your family's future," She reminded me.

"Oh, your family's future is all but assured at this point," Ilbryen said confidently. "Leon Draver and Tessa Morse are household names at this point, and everyone knows what you are capable of."

Ilbryen stopped as if that was enough information, but Tessa and I shared a look, before focusing back on Ilbryen. He rolled his eyes in response.

"For nobles, social worth is just as valuable as money," Ilbryen explained, before frowning after he started. "Didn't I go over this already?"

"Yeah, sorry I've been a bit busy *not dying* over the last few months," I responded, a bit of frustration leaking into my voice.

"Oh... yeah, that is fair enough I suppose!" He admitted sheepishly. "Well, being well known is an important aspect of noble society. People would gladly do favors for you, help out with problems, and even slide you a bit of money should you need it. When your siblings start looking for a job, their employers will fall over themselves to get them on board. Right now, your name is worth its weight in gold. Figuratively, at least."

"Well... that's good, another advantage for them in the long run."

"Precisely! Though, keep in mind it means you need to be aware of what you are doing next time you go on an adventure," Ilbyren pointed out. "As popular as you are, your actions are, you are being watched."

"We will be careful," Tessa said, and I nodded.

"Good! Now, I came here for two reasons. The first was to explain your pay increase, which we already covered," Ilbyren said, sitting on the coffee table in front of Tessa and me. "The second reason was to explain some of the things that would be happening over the next few months."

"This is supposed to be my time off," I pointed out.

"True, and we will not force you to do anything. Our contract is very clear that the time between adventures is yours. However, I did just explain to you how important social status is to a noble, and what sort of benefits it could provide your family..."

I let out a long-suffering sigh and nodded, gesturing for him to continue.

"Excellent! Fabulous! Striking while the iron is hot could mean the difference between your name being famous and your family becoming a legacy!" He explained. "We have several events planned over the next two months, and we would very much appreciate it if both of you were among the guests."

"What kind of events?"

"A charity ball, a party to celebrate our success where we will be revealing the next step in the program, two company events, as well as a few smaller parties with potential investors," He responded with a smile. "There are also interviews, meet and greets, signing events, tours of some facilities, all sorts of smaller things."

"That sounds like a lot," Tessa said, her nervousness leaking out. I could tell she was struggling with the idea of being shown off.

"It is, and I would recommend you do not go to all of them," Ilbryen suggested. "Keeping your appearances balanced is important. If you go too few, it seems like you aren't willing to participate in the noble world. Go to all of them, and it seems you're going overboard or enjoying the spotlight a bit too much. My bosses would *very much* like you to go to the announcement party and do at least a few interviews. If you agree, we are willing to hold an auction for the stuff you brought home. It will give the 'loot' authenticity and, most likely, greatly increase what you get for everything."

I looked at Tessa with a raised eyebrow, and she frowned, thinking for a moment. With a shrug and a shift of her head, she agreed, so I looked back at Ilbryen. He looked excited about something but quickly schooled his expression behind a smile.

"We're in," I agreed. "Get us a list of everything, and explain what the events are exactly, and we will pick which one to go to."

"Perfect! Tomorrow, come to my office, and we can go over the list together," Ilbryen said with a clap.

Before he could say anything, I heard the front door open, a light ring echoing through the house to alert us that someone was home. I leaned up and turned to see my mom coming in, carrying her purse. She focused in on me immediately but spotted Ilbryen a second after.

"Oh, I didn't know you were stopping by Ilbryen," She said with a frown. "I thought you weren't going to bother them until they had some time to settle in."

"Ah, well... I just wanted to tell them a few things," He admitted, nervously scratching the back of his head. "It's a good thing I did. They went out on their own!"

"Oh dear. I completely forgot to mention that, nothing bad happened, did it?" She asked, suddenly worried.

"No, by some miracle, only one person recognized them."

"Oh... thats encouraging!" She responded with a smile, before it quickly fell to a frown. "Still, it's better you let them get back to their time off."

"Right... Well, I will see you in a few days," Ilbryen said with a nervous smile before quickly walking out of the living room.

"But-" Tessa started, only for the Noble to raise his hand.

"A. Few. Days." He repeated emphatically. "Call me when you feel you're ready."

A few seconds later, he was gone, leaving us alone in our home. My mom chuckled and shook her head.

"I don't know when it happened, but that man is terrified of me," She said, laughing to herself as she made her way to the living room. "I never did anything."

"Mom, did you know how successful our show was?" I asked, sliding forward to the edge of the couch.

"By the sounds of it, I had a better idea than you," She admitted, sitting down on the room's second couch. "I assumed Ilbryen and said something."

"Yeah, just now."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't get caught up in anything after you left."

"We didn't see many people," Tessa explained. "Well, we saw some people, but nobody that close."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I should have said something when you talked about going shopping, but it honestly just didn't occur to me," She admitted. "By the time your siblings were being sent to school, Ilbryen had an idea that your show was going to take off, so we entered them under fake names. Plus, the security at their school is incredible."

"Ilbryen mentioned bodyguards. Should we look into getting some for everyone?"

The idea that my family might be at risk because I was now a celebrity, which alone was something my brain was struggling to wrap around, was bone-chilling. I caught myself with my hand on my axe, ready to pull it free in a moment.

"We have been fine so far," Mom assured me. "Talk it over with Ilbryen when you go and see him, which better be in two days, no less!"

We spent a bit talking about our day and what my mom had been up to since we left. Apparently, she had found a knitting club of all things and went there occasionally to hang out with a few people her age, or at least her maturity level, considering one of them looked like someone a few years younger than me but was, in fact, more than twice her age.

Eventually, after an hour or so of chatting and eventually showing what we had bought from the clothing store, as well as explaining some of the things that Tessa could do on her chip, Olivia and Tyler arrived home. They landed outside on the terrace bridge in a decent-sized hover vehicle, hopping out and running to the door, both of them stumbling inside. Mom got up to start on dinner, denying my offer to help. Tyler and I played some video games, passing the Nerve Helmet and switching out with Oliva and Tessa. I could tell Oliva wasn't very interested in the game, but since Tessa was, she did her best to pretend.

Tessa was, of course, completely oblivious to her new hanger on. It was clear to me that my little sister was watching the new, badass woman in her life closely. Never mind that Tessa was clearly, at least to me, shocked and unnerved by almost every new thing we saw, Olivia was clearly already looking up to her. It made me wonder if she had been watching any of our shows. I mentally debated whether or not to warn Tessa, before settling on not, mostly because I knew she was a good role model whether or not she knew.

A few hours later, Mom called us in for dinner, serving a spread of home pasta, meatballs, and sauce. We chatted and ate, Oliva and Tyler telling us about their day and about what they learned in school. When we finished, we sat down in the living room again and watched a movie, something about a magic wizard from space. I was completely lost, but Tessa was so enthralled by the animation and movie aspect that she was on the edge of her seat. Oliva and Tyler both fell asleep halfway through, and we had to carry them to bed.

## Chapter 28

We spent the next two days relaxing in the apartment. Or at least we spent one day relaxing. The second day was spent trying to relax as the previous months and a previous lifetime of near-constant activity and danger for Tessa caught up to the two of us. We woke up on the second day antsy for something, sick of sitting around on our butts, doing nothing. I could see Tessa bouncing her leg with built-up tense energy, desperate to do anything but sit around.

For a while, we debated what we could do. We thought about going out on the Hovercar for a drive or maybe even leaving the city behind and just looking for something to do. Eventually, and unfortunately, we settled on just waiting it out and staying at home. Neither of us was eager to tempt fate and go out into the public, not when we had just barely dodged a proverbial bullet the last time we did. So, instead of going out, we spent more time around the house, hanging out with my siblings. We called Ibryen to set up a meeting for early the next day.

The following day, Tessa and I made a quick breakfast, called for the company hovercar, and took a ride around the city so Tessa could see it from every angle. She was getting more used to the new world, or at least less nervous about everything. When the ride around the city was over, we made our way to Ibryen's office, the same one I had signed my original contract in.

We stepped into the building, the docking entrance closing behind us, and immediately froze. What had once been an elegant but small office, was now buzzing with activity. The room was the same, but I could hear chips ringing and people talking. In the lobby alone, there were

nearly a dozen people. Most of the people were too busy to notice the two random people who just entered, but a few spotted us and stared, eyes wide.

Before anyone could do anything about our presence, though, a familiar face stood from the receptionist's desk and greeted us. As she smiled and waved us closer, I debated if I should even tell Tessa she was a robotic assistant.

"Welcome back Mr. Draver, and it is good to meet you Ms. Morse. Mr. Middison is waiting in his office," She said, stepping out from behind her desk and leading us through to the inner office.

The robotic assistant led us into his office, which was almost the exact same as before, as far as I could tell. The assistant knocked on the door into the Noble's office, opening it when he said to come in.

"Ah, right on time, Leon, Tessa. It's good to see you. I hope you feel well-rested and relaxed?" He asked, standing up so we could shake his hand. "Please, have a seat."

He gestured to the comfortable chairs in front of his desk, which we both happily sat in. He leaned back in his chair with a smile, looking back at his assistant.

"Bring us coffee, dear, and tell Pinari to come see me in about half an hour," He said before focusing back on us, the assistant wordlessly nodding and leaving, closing the doors as she left.

"Who's Pinari?" Tessa asked.

"Our stylist," He explained. "Once we decide which events you are going to, he will design some outfits for you. He may also wish to change your hairstyle."

"I don't mind that," I said, partially to remind him that this was all voluntary. "But we are keeping it simple. No crazy noble implants or color-changing dyes."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about it," He assured me, raising his hand to stop my complaint. "A little trust, please? There is a reason I called for him. Just meet him, you'll see."

For the next half hour, we discussed at least forty different events of all different types, taking a small break when Ilbyren's robotic assistant brought coffee and a plate of pastries. Plenty of them sounded exactly the same to me, but Ilbyren insisted they were all very different and important in their own way. Eventually, we agreed to just over a dozen separate events, spread out between now and our next jump to a new "adventure." It was a varied spread, including four different interviews, a few investor parties, a celebration for the upcoming "season", a few meet and greets. It was hard not to get a little lost between all of the events, plus the announcement party for the expansion.



When we were finished, it didn't take long for the stylist to show up, who seemed very excited to be working with us. He was dressed rather conservatively, at least for a noble. He wore a black dress shirt with a silver tie, a pair of thin-framed glasses with red glass, and dark gray slacks shimmered silver as he moved. His shoes were simply black, tying the look together. Or, I assumed it did, at least. I had absolutely no fashion sense whatsoever.

He started by taking a full body scan of each of us, which was done by a pair of palm-sized drones. They floated around each of us, a green scanning beam coming out of one end as they silently flew around both of us. While they were working, we discussed what we were looking for.

"So. What sort of approach are you taking?" He asked, rather bluntly, which only made me like him more. "

"We haven't discussed it yet, but I was going to suggest that we try for a sort of pragmatic, cunning lowie, a diamond in the rough vibe. A young entrepreneur who managed to support his family, including a deathly sick sibling, by applying his smarts and running his own business," He explained, the words sending an alarm bell off in my head. "He saw an opportunity to raise his family to greatness, and he grabbed it with both hands. Surely such an impressive individual is worth investing in, especially when he has demonstrated how well he perseveres through adversity."

"What?" I asked, looking confused. A glance at Tessa showed she wasn't much better off. "What do you mean?"

"You need to start cultivating an image, Leon," Ibryen explained. "Because the default will be everyone assuming you're just a lucky lowie with a knack for survival. Your fame is good, but that will fade over time. If you take that fame and cultivate it with an impressive image, that's much better. It's one of the things I meant when I mentioned making your name a legacy rather than just famous."

"I... I guess I understand, but I'm not some master actor or socialite," I pointed out. "I don't even have the instinct you have from growing up a noble."

"Yes, but you do have a firm grasp of how the world is supposed to work and how it *actually* works," He pointed out. "You talked about nobles a few times while on your trip, and while it wasn't exactly kind words, there was enough insight to show you're far from stupid. Besides, saying you grabbed the opportunity with both hands is only stretching the truth, not an outright lie."

"So what, just keep from saying anything stupid?" I asked, getting a laugh from Tessa.

"So, no chance of working?" She said, slapping my shoulder.

"At the lowest level, yes," Ilbryen said, ignoring Tessa's joke. "But we believe you should be capable of much more than that."

"What about Tessa?" I asked, ignoring the look she gave me when I did.

"We advise that Tessa adopts a similar image, with one difference," He answered. "Rather than being a diamond in the rough, you will be a lost noble, someone who, had your world not ended, would have been the equivalent of an alternate world cousin."

"What? Why? Why not just be the same?" Tessa asked with a confused look.

"Because it's true," He responded with a smirk. "Your family was extremely wealthy before the Collapse. It took us a while to locate your records in old computer hard drives, but your family owned a series of mines all over your home world. Everything from precious metals to radioactive materials."

"I... Grandpa never mentioned anything like that..." She admitted, her words sounding like she didn't quite believe him. "Why-"

"We are about seventy-five percent sure," Ilbryen said with a smile. "Which is more than enough for us to run with it as gospel. So, in truth, you're in the same boat as Leon. Someone who was new to how things worked but who quickly grasped the opportunity. It even takes into account how you reacted to being told of the disparity between lowies and nobles. From what we can glean from your history books, the wealthy were expected to have a certain level of noblesse oblige."

"Of what?" Tessa and I asked at the same time.

"Noblesse oblige. The idea that those of higher stations have an inherent responsibility to take care of and nurture those below them," He explained. "There are a small number of nobles who preach the concept these days. They will most likely be in touch if you appear to have similar views."

"I... that's good?" She responded, her voice trailing off in uncertainty, the confidence she had when we first arrived quickly fading as she fell further and further out of her depth.

"Pinari, is that enough for you to go off of?" Ilbryen asked, focusing on our stylist to take the pressure off Tessa.

"... I believe so," The stylist responded with a nod, turning to Tessa and me. "I will start on some preliminary designs and get them to you the day after tomorrow. We will start with the closest event, the announcement celebration."

We continued to talk about the events, spending the most time on the announcement event. The event was two weeks away, but with how Ilbryen was talking about it, it sounded like every moment and angle had been meticulously planned out to the nearest inch. Pinari asked questions about the party palette, what the dress code of the staff would be, what the colors of those who worked at the company would be, and even specifically what Ilbryen would be wearing. The noble manager responded with easy excitement, promising samples of cloth, color swatches, and more. I could feel Tessa's dawning horror at what we had agreed to, mostly because it matched my own perfectly.

Eventually, Pinari left, and after a few moments, Ilbryen started laughing, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't torture you two like that. You have both been extremely accommodating to my requests," He said, a teasing smile now on his face. "Neither of you has anything to worry about. Between myself and my staff, neither of you will be alone for a second. We will run you through some practice, and the party is set to be casual, which means unless you attack someone, no one is going to take offense if you mess something up. Even better, the press will be kept away until the release conference begins, which means if you mess up, we will have plenty of time to run damage control. We will be around to help you every step of the way, I promise."

We spent a bit more chatting about the event before, eventually, Ilbryen escorted us out of his office and back into the lobby. Our hover car was waiting for us, and before long we were on our way home.

We spent the rest of the day with my family, Tessa and I helping Mom make dinner, which ended up being a homemade version of some high-end dish that Tyler had had at a friend's house. Eventually, Tessa and I retired to my bed long after everyone else was already asleep.

## Chapter 29

I woke up the next morning to the sound of my sister making a shocked "EEP" sound from the doorway into my room. She was standing there, her eyes wide in shock. Tessa, who had slept through the noise, noticed me shifting around and sat up as well, spotting my sister. Before either of us could say anything, she sprinted away, leaving the door wide open.

"That... is going to be interesting to explain," I said, shaking my head as I rolled out of my bed and crossed my room, shutting the door. When I turned back, Tessa was sitting on the edge of my bed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." I suddenly blanked, my eyes locking on Tessa's. "Well.. we... and I... Umm.."

She stood with a smirk on her lips, walking closer to the door. I stood out of the way so she could leave, but she stopped with her hand on the doorknob.

"You're not nearly dumb enough not to have noticed," She said, giving me a piercing look.

"I... didn't want to assume."

She shook her head and stepped closer like she was gonna kiss my cheek, only to punch me in the shoulder. I winced and stepped back, rubbing the now bruised spot.

"Hey, what was that for?"

"Not saying anything before we left was fine. We had a lot of people watching us, and it would have made things complicated," She said, stepping closer again and looking up at me accusingly. "What's the delay now?"

"You're still settling in!" I explained. "I didn't want to add to the pile."

"Did you maybe consider that-" She stopped, looking back into my room and gesturing to my bed, the one we had both just been in. "That it would have been nice to have some... closer support? More than just... More than just..."

I watched as Tessa started to come undone. Days of being overwhelmed, of being dragged around a world she wasn't familiar with, filled with wonders and danger she didn't know, boiled over all at once. I could see her eyes welling up, her body tense as she physically tried to hold it together.

Silently, I reached forward, taking her hand, which was still pointing out to my bed. I pulled her closer, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her into a tight hug.

"I'm sorry, Tessa. I genuinely didn't want to put more on your shoulders," I explained. "I didn't think..."

"I... I was worried I was wrong," She said, her head in the crook of my neck. "I was worried-"

"No, you were right," I said, pushing her back a bit so I could look into her eyes. "I made an assumption, and I shouldn't have."

"We both should have said something," She amended, and I nodded.

"You and I, we are partners," I said with a smile, ignoring my own damp face. "Where you go, I go. It's as simple as that."

"Where you go, I go," She repeated, a smile poking through her watery eyes.

"There is no pressure. You work through everything you need to, settle in, and get used to all this fucking craziness," I explained, gesturing around us. "And I'll still be with you when you do."

She nodded before leaning up slightly and kissing me. It was just a peck, but it was enough to convey what she wanted. She pulled back, blushing and smiling, before opening the door and leaving to go to her room.

When my door was finally shut, I took a deep, heavy breath, rubbing my face energetically, wiping my eyes, and shaking my head. I knew, or hoped rather, that there was something between us. I had been feeling it for a while and could see it in how we talked and interacted. Like she had said, I would have been stupid not to feel it. I just wish I had caught on to her wanting some confirmation.

That's what I get for making an assumption, I suppose.

With the drama past, nothing else particularly interesting happened for the rest of the day, which continued into the next. Eventually, our outfits arrived, delivered by Pinari personally. He assured us that there were simply the rough versions, and he would be putting together something much more robust for the actual event.

Tessa and I both tried them out, finding them to be relatively comfortable and interesting without being too over the top. We talked with the fashion expert for a while about any changes we wanted before he packed up his clothes and promptly left.

"I like him," I said as he climbed into a hover car and flew away.

"I do, too. No-nonsense people are always good to work with." Tessa agreed.

The next day, we were directed to a hair salon, where both Tessa and I got a haircut and full treatment. What I thought was going to be a regular haircut turned out to be an elaborate hair scalp massage and hair treatment process, all done by hand. The massage was surprisingly nice, even if it felt like a waste of money. When we left almost two hours after entering, both Tessa and I had neatly trimmed hair, with remarkably little done to change it. Tessa's hair had gotten a bit longer since I had first met her, but now it was a perfectly styled pixie cut. My hair was in the same boat, cut back down to what I had when I first crossed over to Alt-Earth.

A few days went by, and Pinari stopped by again, this time with our improved outfits. We had no real input for him other than we liked them, but he pushed us to find at least a few things we thought could use some improvement. When we were done, he promptly left again, only pausing to complement our new haircuts before flying away in his hovercar.

Over the next week and more, Tessa and I had several appointments, most of them with or at least included Illbryen. We discussed everything from noble slang to what sort of food we should expect to some of the big names we should expect and listen for.

"Luckily, the general consensus seems to be that, even if you appear to be cunning and have noble tendencies, you have every reason to be disconnected," Ilbyren explained. "And it's an idea we have a lot of people working on reinforcing. Basically, if you mess up, as long as you're not kicking puppies, you should be okay."

"What does our... What do lowies think of us?" I asked, stopping to reword my question.

"Like a combination of an action movie hero and an actual role model," The PR expert that Ilbryen brought in explained happily. "And both of your action figures are selling hilariously well as a result. Some of the more... energetic groups don't like some of your points on nobles holding all the cards and that they should just accept it, but it's a small, powerless minority that's already being suppressed."

I let out a long breath at what he said. It was inevitable that people would dislike what I had agreed to, between people being jealous and the general dislike people had for nobles. I could feel Tessa cringing at the fact that, not too long ago, we would have considered the people we were now working with to be the bad guys. People who were keeping lowies suppressed. I now knew that it was a bit more complicated. I highly doubt the sweet woman with whom mom traded cookie recipes or the young girl who nervously asked us to sign her model was plotting lowie suppression after all.

Still, didn't make it any more fun.

I just had to focus on the fact that I was doing it for my family's future. So that my siblings and their kids could be happy and safe.

Ilbyren immediately picked up on the shift in moods and quickly cut off any following questions.

"How about we take a recess for lunch," He suggested, his coworker finally realizing he might have said the wrong thing. He quickly agreed and left, picking up on the uncomfortable undertone.

"We are learning PR from him?" I asked once the doors were closed. "You're gonna need a crowbar to get his foot out of his mouth."

"I'll see if someone else can come back," Ilbryen said, shaking his head.

"What exactly did he mean by 'suppressed'?" Tessa asked, still a bit tense.

"...It means their social posts don't go nearly as far as other people," He explained with another wince. "It's not complete silencing, just a statistical blanket to keep their opinions from spreading too much."

"It's kind of like having their voices turned down in volume," I explained since Tessa had very little knowledge of the internet in general. "Not muted or silence, just reduced."

"Oh... thought it might have been a nice word for killed," Tessa admitted, getting a flinch from Ilbryen.

"No, definitely not. Despite what lowies might think, we don't default to killing people," He assured us. "There are some bad eggs among us who like to think they are special and, therefore, should be able to play with lives, but the rest of us keep them in line. Or we try to, at least."

I resisted the urge to repeat some of the stories I had heard over the years, about nobles playing with lowies for their amusement, but instead focusing on the moment. We only had a day left before the event, and I didn't feel like starting anything that would make getting ready more difficult.

We had lunch, something light and easy, as Tessa preferred, now that we could afford to not worry about where our next meal was coming from. When we were done, we kept on working, discussing some of the big names that would be at the party and what the actual press release would be like. We even discussed the small after-party, which would only be for us, our new "coworkers," the higher-up staff for the company, and our families. When everything was done a few hours after lunch, Ilbryen walked us to the lobby. Once again, most of the staff stopped and looked as we walked to our car, which was docked against the building.

"You'd think they would get over it by now," I said, giving one guy, whose eyes were dropping a little low as he looked at Tessa, a harsh look. "We've been here several times over the past two weeks."

"Forgive them. They are a bit awed at what you represent," He said with a shrug. "The fact that they can claim to have worked on this project in its early stages is a substantial bump to their resumes."

Tessa laughed, shaking her head.

"They are staring at us because it means a bigger paycheck!" She explained when I gave her a confused look.

I could only shake my head and chuckle as we climbed into the hover car, Ilbuyen waving at us as we headed home.

## Chapter 30

When the day of the party finally arrived, Tessa and I woke up early, both of us showing clear signs of night and getting a good night's rest. After quickly getting ready, I said goodbye to Mom before leaving for Ilbryen's office. Once we arrived, we were ushered into a make-up room, where a make-up artist stepped in with a cheery greeting and an eager smile.

Neither of us was fully comfortable with make-up, so at first, both of us refused any real touch-ups. Tessa, who at least had some experience wearing it, drew the line at some basic lipstick and other things. However, after the worker showed us a few examples of her work, and both she and Ilbryen assured us that it was part of the process, we agreed to let her fix a few things. They worked on Tessa first, whisking her away to get dressed when she was done, then pulling me into the same room to trim my face and cover a few spots. Not long after that, I was done, the artist seemingly satisfied with her work. I was led to a dressing room, where I quickly put on my outfit, only to get it checked over by one of the staff, helping me fix up and get everything on "properly."

When I finally stepped out of the dressing room, I almost walked right into Tessa.

"Shit, sor-"

When she recovered and looked at me, my brain finally caught up, and I realized she was wearing her outfit.

She was dressed in a tight cobalt blue long-sleeve overcoat, one that was meant to be kept open and only went to the back of her thighs. Under that was a silvery white shirt, made to look like it was metallic as it shifted. Her pants were black, loose at the bottom, with simple black shoes on her feet. I could see she had her pistol on her hip, the weapon recently cleaned and refurbished to shine like new, with her extendable sword on her other hip. When my eyes returned to her face, she smirked, having clearly caught me looking. Her make-up was light, clearly put on to accent her looks rather than shift them. I could tell she was wearing lipstick, but that was more or less it.

"Like the view?" She asked teasingly.



"Hard not to," I said with a smile. "You look good."

She blushed lightly, clearly not expecting the full, honest answer. I turned to look at myself in one of the mirrors, resisting the urge to mess with my outfit. I was dressed in a black overcoat, slightly longer than Tessa's, but not by much. Under that was a maroon dress shirt marked with gold buttons and highlights. My pants were a nearly black dark gray that led down to a pair of black loafers. I also had my axe, in hatchet form, on my hip, as well as my own pistol, which had gotten a similar treatment as Tessa's.

"You don't look so bad yourself," She said with a smile.

Having finished looking at myself in the mirror, we stepped out of the prep room to find that Ilbryen's office was still a spinning tizzy of activity, to the point that people barely stopped to look at us. Ilbryen spotted us immediately and waved us over.

"The party is starting now, but you two aren't scheduled to arrive for about thirty minutes," He explained. "Go to the back gardens, find a place to sit and relax. Your limo will pick you up from there, so don't worry about coming to find me."

I nodded, and together Tessa and I made our way through the office to a large open balcony area along the back of the skyscraper. It was huge, with several dozen plants in white, hardened pots and flower beds filled with just as many different plants, trees, bushes, and vines. There were benches and tables interspersed throughout the whole space, with the inner ring kept open. I could see a few other garden spaces attached to nearby buildings, many with vines and flowering plants hanging down from them. The air was clean and cool despite being in the middle of a city.

Tessa found a clean bench and sat down, immediately fidgeting with the hilt of her collapsable sword.

"You alright?" I asked, sitting down beside her.

"I'm... coping." She said, releasing the weapon and crossing her arms.

"I know the feeling," I teased, getting a half-hearted glare from her. "You ready for this?"

"I'm not going to break down in front of everyone, if that's what you're worried about," She assured me, taking a deep breath and letting it out, probably a bit harsher than she intended. "You can't expect me to be perfectly calm, can you?"

"No, I get it," I said, holding my hand out for her. "It's funny, I jumped into your world with hardly a second thought, but a party is making me nervous too."

"Cause you can't kill anyone who messes with you here," She says, pausing to contemplate the possibility before shaking her head.

"Yeah, probably a bad idea."

She laughed, standing up and taking my hand, pulling me up with her. She led me to the center of the garden, where we were almost completely surrounded by carefully maintained plants. She closed her eyes and, for a moment did nothing, before leaning in and kissing me. I was surprised, but after a split second of hesitation, I returned her kiss. When she eventually pulled away, she was smiling.

"What was that for?" I asked, my hands now resting on her hips.

"Just a reminder," She said. "And a thank you. For standing by me, even now."

"Do you need me to repeat myself?" I asked with a smirk. "Where you go, I go."

She smiled, and for a while we just enjoyed each other's company. Part of me had forgotten how... easy it was to just be around Tessa, how well we knew each other. Surprisingly, I found myself thinking back to Alt-Earth, with how simple it was. No need to worry about the future, about how my image affected my family and my legacy. Just the struggle against the wild, Tessa by my side, ready to jump into hell with me.

When the limo finally pulled down to the side of the garden, it docked with it smoothly, giving us a good look at the massive vehicle. When Ilbryen had called it a limo, in my mind I had imagined a longer vehicle with room for plenty and a fancy interior. Instead, what stopped by the side of the beautiful gardens was a monster of shocking colors and excess. It was massive enough to fit at least three of the company hovercars we had been using up to this point, three if you did it by volume rather than shape. Its entire body was chromed out, with the seams lit up with a rapidly shifting rainbow.

When it finally locked itself to the side of the garden, the door melted open, the panel flowing like water to reveal the interior. I couldn't help but shake my head at the over-the-top and ridiculousness design. As we climbed inside, Tessa leading the way, the first thing I did was call out to whatever computer was piloting the monstrosity.

"Driver..." I started, hesitating when I realized I didn't really know if it could hear me. After a few seconds a ding echoed through the car, and the interior lights pulsed twice. "Uh... turn the extra exterior rainbow lights off, please."

"Understood."

The lights blinked, and the interior shifted back to the low-level lighting it had been when we first got in. Hoping that it had done as I asked, I looked around the interior. It was similar to

the interior of our hover car, with a handful of extra amenities, including a media screen on both ends of the interior, two fridges, and several drink dispensers. I contemplated seeing just what they had to drink but thought better of it. I was sure there would be plenty of alcohol at the party.

It didn't take long for us to get to the party, which was unsurprising since it was being held only a few buildings away. One of the more prominent nearby skyscrapers had a section about fifty floors built for large parties. Ilbryen had shown us images of the venue, and it was essentially just multiple floors combined into one large open space. According to the noble, the massive glass walls made an incredible view out into Inner York City, especially the newly reestablished Central Park.

Attached to that floor was a large platform, an open space that was supported by curved supports. Usually, it was just a place for people to congregate before heading inside, but now it had what looked like two or three dozen people. I could see a line of limos and hover cars, all waiting to dock with the platform next.

When it was finally our turn, the door out of the limo melted away, just like it had when we boarded. We stepped out, and immediately, everyone was focused on us. There was a long silence before everyone moved at once. People brought up cameras, taking hundreds of pictures, with even more drones flying around the. Quite a few people tried to get close, holding out recording equipment while asking us questions, but some larger people stopped them, clearly security of some kind. Silently, I hooked my arm with Tessa's, and we stepped forward, the crowd breaking for us to pass through. There were only a few times that security had to step in to help with some "slower" people.

Eventually, after ten minutes, we *finally* stepped inside. A large, all-glass door opened for us, closing behind us immediately and sealing the noise out like a switch being flicked. It was an impressive room, easily four stories tall, with only four central supports connecting the floor below us to the ceiling above. Almost immediately, Ilbryen spotted us, smiling as he crossed the remaining distance. He reached out and shook both our hands.

"Welcome Mr. Draver, Ms. Morse! Thank you for coming!" He said, as if he hadn't been sure if we would. "Please, allow me to introduce you to some people!"

That started a round of introductions that continued for the next hour. First, he introduced his boss, his boss's boss, and eventually even the boss to end all bosses. Even the usually calm and confident noble seemed nervous about that introduction despite the fact that the middle-aged woman appeared to be very happy with him. She congratulated him on the progress of the program, commented that many of her family watched our show constantly, and even asked if we would mind signing a few things for her younger nieces and nephews.

All of this, save some of the specific responses, we had gone over before, during one of our many discussions in Ilbryen's office. I was thankful for it, too, as I don't think I could have kept a straight face otherwise, considering the person in charge of Ilbryen's entire branch had

long bubblegum pink hair, glowing pink eyes, and used make-up to make her lips look like a pink heart. Apparently, it was a look passed down several generations. She was *born* with the mostly pink coloring.

Once all the important people were met and their important hands shaken, we were introduced at a much more casual pace to several people around Ilbryen's level of power. These were mostly people from the company, as well as several investors and a few other people that Ilbryen seemed a bit eager to show us off too. At that point, the night party shifted into a bit of a blur, people and names getting thrown at me at a pace my brain couldn't keep up with. By the time we finally sat down at our assigned table, both Tessa and I were starting to feel overwhelmed. Thankfully Ilbryen had seen that coming and timed our arrival and introduction alongside lunch, which would let us sit down and unwind with only a few people around us.

Tessa swallowed the drink she was provided, some sort of champagne, in a single gulp, and I followed right after her before motioning for a refill. I looked around, hoping that nobody had spotted our less-than-noble behavior, spotting the pink-haired woman who had made Ilbryen sweat. We locked eyes for a moment, and she smiled, winked, and raised her glass, finishing it in a gulp as well.

I chuckled as the waiter brought us refills, whispering what had happened into Tessa's ear.

## Chapter 31

Ilbryen sat down beside me shortly after our champagne flutes were refilled, our table quickly filling up with several other people that I recognized from his office, including the lawyer who had initially explained my original contract so long ago. We made polite conversation, mostly about our experiences in Inner York City, which made me think Ilbryenn had banned Alt-Earth as a topic. At his prompting, we told the story about our first trip out of our house, how we had completely underestimated how famous we were, which Ilbryenn admitted was mostly his fault.

"Please tell me you are looking for her?" One of the noble women asked. I was pretty sure she worked down the hall from Ilbryen.

"Of course!" Ilbryen said with a smirk. "I should know who she is by tomorrow."

"Why?" I asked, looking at the noble suspiciously. "You're not going to take that statue from her, are you?"

"Of course not!" He said, waving my worries away dramatically. "She needs to know what she has!"

"Imagine, some random young woman out there, who is probably a huge fan if she had that figure with her, has the first ever signed memorabilia from you two," The same noble woman said. "Not only does the value of that item skyrocket, but the meaning behind it does as well. Plus, there is the story..."

"Give it a few dozen years. It might end up in a museum at some point," The lawyer said with a smirk.

"Hmm... It would be an interesting addition to the entrance collection," said another woman, one I didn't recognize at all. "Perhaps we should ask for a contract promising we get first purchase rights if she or her family ever sell it."

I caught Ilbryen's eye, lifting an eyebrow in a silent question. He finished his bite of salad before chuckling and nodding.

"At BA Entertainment headquarters, the main entrance has turned into a sort of display for memorabilia from our greatest successes," He explained. "It's a sizable collection, and I believe Alineta is correct. The figurine would eventually make a good addition. I'll bring it up with Camolan during our next meeting."

Over the next hour, we slowly ate lunch, enjoying first a tart but enjoyable salad, then a plate of chicken stuffed with mushrooms and cheese before finally being served a light, fluffy bowl of some sort of cold whipped cream with chunks of strawberry and a drizzle of melted chocolate. I was barely able to contain myself, but Tessa failed to hold back her sounds of appreciation twice, causing her to blush deeply. Thankfully, everyone was enjoying the meal enough that they understood, though they did tease her a bit.

When our plates were cleared away and our drinks refilled, Ilbryen left with a promise that we would see him soon. Ten minutes later, our attention was pulled to the center stage, and Ilbryen stepped out with a smile and a wave.

"Thank you everyone for coming!" He said once the applause petered out. "Today, we are here to celebrate the success of our newest program and, as I'm sure you've all heard, our first big announcement for what the future has in store. Now, we've learned a lot from our first show, which reminds me, let's all give a round of applause for our new peers, Leon and Tessa!"

Tessa and I stood up, waved, and nodded as everyone clapped and cheered. I could see dozens of recording drones flitting around, and I couldn't help but give a lazy salute to one of them as it hovered closer. As the applause settled, Tessa and I sat back down, the focus of the crowd once again shifting to Ilbryen and the stage.

"I would also like to personally thank the both of you for doing such an amazing job," He said, gesturing to the both of us. "Truly, the both of you have an instinct that any one of us would be lucky to have!"

We got another round of applause, though this time we remained seated. I also spotted quite a few considering looks at Ilbryen's words.

"Now, there have been a lot of theories about what tonight's announcement would be. Most of them have been about what our next step is, and a considerable number have guessed that we will be expanding our programming!" Ilbryen said excitedly, a wide smile on his face. "Well, I am happy to announce that those theories are, in fact, correct! We here at BA Entertainment are happy to announce three new pairs of reality travelers, each of whom will soon embark on their own adventures. Would you come up on stage, please?"

The crowd cheered wildly as six people made their way on stage. It was easy to see that all of them were lowies, easily identified by their complete and utter lack of any wild or avant-garde additions to their person or clothing. As far as I could tell, they were normal people like I had been before agreeing to Ilbryen's offer. Once they were all standing behind Ilbryen, separated slightly into pairs, the noble man began going up to each of them, asking a few questions like their name and where they were from. They had clearly been coached, with at least two of them absolutely hating all the attention.

Not that I could blame them. I hated it, too.

As we listened, the noble woman sitting next to Tessa smirked and leaned closer to whisper to her.

"That's your fault, you know. The fact that they are in pairs," She said with a teasing smile. "You joining Leon did so well that we had to include it in our standard practice. Good job!"

The presentation continued until Ilbryen finally finished talking to our new coworkers. They climbed down off the stage, Ilbryen quickly focusing back on the crowd. He talked for a while about when their adventure would start and embellishing what sort of challenges they would be going to. He answered a few audience questions before saying goodbye to everyone and leaving the stage.

With the attention-grabbing presentation over, the tables exploded with discussion of the announcement, with eyes slipping over Tessa and me constantly.

The celebration continued, entertainment in the form of a band, which played slow background music as we continued to talk. Eventually, Ilbryen returned, and I looked around.

"Did they not get an invite?" I asked when none of the people Ilbryen had presented on stage showed up with him.

"The other adventurers? They were invited to stay but ultimately decided it would be better to return back to their families and loved ones," He explained. "Unlike you, two of them will be leaving in a week or so, if everything goes as planned. Then another pair two months later, and then the last two months after that. I believe the four who are not leaving in the coming weeks will be joining us for the smaller afterparty."

"We think it will help keep excitement up for all concurrent adventurers," The woman beside Tessa explained. "My idea, of course."

"Of course," Tessa repeated, looking at me subtle with an exasperated look.

"When did you guys start calling us that?" Trying to shift the topic.

"Adventurers? Well... it seemed poignant considering the circumstances," Ilbryen explained, looking over at us with a small smile.

Something about how he was talking, a sudden shift in demeanor, made me think that there was more to it than he was admitting, but before either Tessa or I could press for more, he suddenly stood up.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a few things to take care of and a few more people to talk to," He said with a smile that only made me more suspicious. "Leon, Tessa, I'll be around to escort you out in another half hour or so."

Before we could say anything, he turned around and left, leaving us alone with the rest of the nobles at our table.

"Jeez... Not very subtle, is he?" I said under my breath, Tessa shaking her head beside me.

For the next thirty minutes, we socialized as best we could. Unfortunately, we were frequently reduced to just nodding and agreeing with most of the things people were saying to us. Most of my attention was on Tessa, who I was pretty sure would strangle the woman beside us if I let her. When Ilbryen finally came around to collect us, we were so appreciative we didn't even push his blatant coverup from earlier.

Unfortunately, we quickly learned that leaving the party was easier said than done, with dozens of people coming to shake our hands, congratulate us, and wish us good luck. A few people even asked for autographs, but Ilbryen shut that down pretty quickly. In the end, it took us nearly twenty minutes to get from our table to the balcony, where our massive hover limo was already waiting for us, its ostentatious lights thankfully still off.

"Oh, are the lights not working?" Ilbryen asked as we got closer, doing our best to ignore the swirling camera drones. "It actually looks good like that..."

"No, I asked the pilot program to turn them off," I explained. "Half expected it to say no."

He laughed and we all climbed in, the last bit of sound from the crowd vanishing as the doors sealed shut. Tessa and I both let out a long sigh of relief.

"Well done, you two, very well done," Ilbryen complemented with a smile. "Seriously, you managed to last the whole party, even with Tessa sitting next to Jilanun. She gives me a run for my money sometimes. Sorry you got stuck with her, by the way. The person in charge of seating placement owed her a favor, apparently. If I had known it was happening I would have stepped in."

"Just... Just get me a drink," Tessa responded, leaning her head against my shoulder.

Pointedly ignoring the display of affection, Ilbryen nodded and started fiddling with a box on the far side of the limo. It popped open to reveal a cooler full of drinks, one of which the noble grabbed and tossed to Tessa, who caught it easily. She cracked it open and took a sip, nodding in appreciation.

The trip in the limo didn't take long, again not surprising, when it only flew us back to the towering building that Ilbryen's office was in, just a few floors up. I could literally see the garden that Tessa and I had waited in not a few hours ago when we stepped out of the limo and across the unfolding entryway.

We stepped into the building, the door sealing behind us as Ilbryen led us further in. We made our way through the building, stepping through a pair of open doors. Inside were about thirty people, most of whom I at least tangentially recognized. I could also see my mother and my siblings sitting at a table on the far side of the room. Overall, there was a much more casual feel in the air.

"Go say hello. There are a few people I want to introduce you to, but they can wait for a while," Ilbryen said. "We can talk later."

I nodded and waved goodbye before Tessa and I both made our way over to my family, sitting down with a long sigh. My brother immediately got up to sit next to me, pestering me about how the party went, while Olivia seemed content in his own seat. The way she was looking down told me she was probably doing something on her Chip. I was surprised she didn't immediately start to talk to Tessa. Then again, I couldn't blame her for being bored. The only thing that kept me from doing that at the previous party was the fact that I had left my chip behind at home.

"How was it, sweetie?" Mom asked. "Everything go smoothly?"



"Who knows?" I responded, shaking my head. "Ilbryen seems to think it went well, so probably."

"It was somehow incredibly stressful and extremely boring," Tessa added, leaning on the table, her hands in her head. "I swear I almost snapped at that woman."

"Some of the nobles are... hard to get used to," Mom diplomatically agreed. "But I've found most of them are just normal people. Maybe a bit more eccentric than lowies."

I settled in to relax with my family and Tessa, occasionally shaking hands with people who stopped by to say hello. After about fifteen minutes, I spotted two of the people Ilbryen introduced on stage. It was a pair of men, at least a few years younger than me, specifically at the age where those years meant a difference in looks. One was a black-haired man with eyes that never stopped moving and a large, muscular frame. The other was blonde, with sharp features and an intelligence behind his eyes that made me think he was the one who called the shots. Immediately, the blonde locked his eyes on Tessa and me. Neither of them looked entirely thrilled to be there, a sentiment I didn't blame them for.

I was even less thrilled when they immediately started heading our way.

## Chapter 32

The blonde future "adventurer," whom Ilbryen had introduced on stage as Anthony, tapped his partner's shoulder, nodding in my direction before leading the way to us. Between weaving around people and stopping to say hello to someone twice, I had plenty of time to get Tessa's attention. I tapped her leg under the table before drawing an arrow in our new coworker's direction. She immediately spotted them, shifting her position slightly as she did.

When they finally got to the table, Anthony smiled wide and reached out to shake my hand while his partner shook Tessa's.

"Hello, it's good to meet you," He said with a nod. "I'm Anthony, and this is Danny. I'd ask, but at this point, neither of you really need any introduction."

"That's fine," I said, gesturing to the empty seats on the other side of the table. "Please, have a seat. How did you guys get caught up in all of this?"

"Danny and I have been friends since before we could walk," Anthony explained. "When Ilbryen found me, we had just finished a job down south. Work dried up, and we came back home to see family and figure out what our next job was going to be."

We talked for a while, discussing our lives and a bit of what it was like to travel to an alternate world. It was clear they were desperate for any edge they could get, and advice from an experienced "adventurer" could undoubtedly come in handy. I, on the other hand, wanted to put to rest a theory that had been buzzing in my skull for ages.

"So... you've talked to the others, yeah?" I asked, Anthony nodding in confirmation. "What was their recruitment experience like?"

"I think Amy and Steve had to quit their jobs... and I think they have a kid who is sick..." Anthony answered, wracking his brain a bit. "Why? Kinda sounds like you want to know for a reason...?"

"Let's just say my recruitment was at the end of a few unfortunate happenings," I explained. "I didn't think it was likely, but without an answer, the question of if nobles were involved..."

"Ah, I see. No, as far as I know, no one else was recruited after suspicious circumstances," He responded understandingly. "Then again, with you as a proof of concept, I can't imagine it was very hard to convince anyone. Danny and I jumped at the opportunity."

The conversation continued, and after a few minutes, a small selection of snacks and drinks were dropped by the table. We started discussing some of the food we had enjoyed since becoming nobles and some of the crazy ideas the nobles had come up with. About halfway through, Olivia stood up, mumbled something about going to the bathroom, and left. Mom immediately stood and followed after her. Olivia dramatically rolled her eyes and huffed but said nothing as she continued to walk. Honestly, I couldn't blame either of them. Mom following me around to the bathroom would have gotten on my nerves too, especially at that age when everything was about becoming more independent, but on the other hand, if Mom hadn't gotten up, I would have. Who knows what kind of weird noble bullshit she could run into.

The conversation eventually shifted to the announcement party and the process of preparing for it. Tessa made a comment about them wearing relatively normal clothes while we had been fitted with outfits that definitely leaned more toward the noble style. Before I could comment that I actually liked my jacket, the room went dark, every source of light from the building itself winking out at the exact same moment. With no windows to the outside, the only light came from the handful of nobles with glowing implants. Thankfully, the darkness only lasted a few seconds, barely enough time for someone to scream in surprise.

Unfortunately, as the lights came back, they did so a split second before a massive explosion shook the building hard enough to knock the dust down from the ceiling.

"What the fuck was that?" Tessa asked, suddenly standing beside me. "Was that an explosion?"

"Certainly felt like it," I responded, looking around wildly, my hand already on my axe, still in its smaller form on my hip. "Tessa, did you see..."

"They haven't come back yet," She answered, looking around just as frantically. "Leon-"

"Stay here, watch over Tyler," I said, already heading for the door, my axe in my hand.

I had only taken a few steps when Ilbyren stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

"Now Leon, you should let security-"

"Get the fuck out of my way."

"Of course, sorry, good luck!" He immediately responded, his face going pale as he moved to the side.

I ran from the room, following the smell of fire and dust, terrified that it would lead me anywhere close to the bathrooms. Sure enough, at the end of the hall I could see the aftershock of the explosion, the bathroom door blown off its hinges and slammed into the wall, dust billowing from the doorway. I could also see my mother lying on the ground, struggling to stand. She had clearly been tossed around, with blood dripping down from a cut on her forehead.

"Mom!" I shouted, crossing the last distance quickly and kneeling beside her. "What happened?"

"Oh god, Leon! She's still inside! Olivia was in the bathroom!" She shouted, still struggling to stand, fighting my hands when I tried to guide her back to the floor. "She is still in there!"

"I'll go look, Mom, just stay here!" I said, trying to get through to her. "Just stay Mom! You're hurt, I'll go get her!"

She nodded weakly, finally laying back on the ground, shivering slightly. Part of me didn't want to leave her alone, but I needed to find Olivia. I stood up and rushed through the door, lifting my shirt to cover my face.

One half of the room was in shambles, with broken and cracked tiles all along one side of the room, the mirror along that wall smashed to oblivion. All of the toilet stalls along that wall were dented and broken. I could see water pooling on the ground under the sinks and chunks of

debris still falling. Surprisingly, the other side of the room was relatively unharmed, a stark contrast to the destruction just across the room.

There was also a hole the size of a hover car along the wall, exposing the room to the elements, wind whipping into the room, stirring up dust and rubble.

"Olivia! Olivia, are you in here?" I called out. "Olivia!"

Before I could call out again, a vehicle slowly rose into view. It was an older hover truck, old enough that there was a clear pilot in the driver's seat rather than an automated one. It had an open flatbed with waist-high walls around the sides. The entire truck looked like a hastily dressed-up repair job, at first glance appearing new and shiny, but with several flaws appearing the harder you looked at it. On that flatbed itself were six people, all of them dressed in black combat armor, with masks and goggles on their faces.

Pulling away from the building, on the other side of the truck was a hover car in a similar state as the truck. One of its doors was slowly closing, and for a split second, I could see and hear my sister.

"Leon, help! They-" She shouted, her words cut off as the door closed, sealing her inside.

Without hesitating, I roared, charging towards the large hole in the wall. My legs strained as I reached the edge before I leaped with every ounce of strength I had. For a moment, I was floating, nothing but air between me and a many thousand-foot drop.

I landed in the back of the truck with enough force to cause it to sink for just a moment. Without hesitation I drove my shoulder into one of the armed men with most of my forward momentum, the force lifting him up and over the side of the flatbed. While everyone was still stunned by my arrival, I slammed my foot into another armored man, slamming him into the cab of the hover car hard enough to spider-web the backward-facing window and partially cave in the metal cab.

At least one of the armed men knew what they were doing, however, because they quickly reacted once they knew what was going on. The furthest one reached down to pull a gun, while the one closest to me pulled out a combat knife of some kind, which, judging from the hum I could hear over the wind, would definitely cut through me like butter.

Before the furthest man could shoot me, however, Tessa landed beside him, having jumped nearly twice the distance I had, slicing downward with her sword, cutting the man's arm off at the elbow.

"What-"

"Tyler and your Mom are with Ilbryen!" Tessa shouted before I could finish asking. "And he is with security. What the fuck is going on?"

I whipped around and slammed the back of my axe into the stomach of the fourth guy hard enough that he collapsed, wheezing as he struggled to breathe. I leaned back just in time to dodge a swipe from the humming knife of the last soldier.

"Tessa, get into the driver's seat!" I shouted, before pointing to the escaping vehicle. "Follow that hover car! They have Olivia!"

She nodded and ran past me, punching the slowly rising soldier I had pushed kicked into the cab. She hacked at the window before diving through. I looked away for a moment to dodge another strike before using my enhanced strength to slam my axe into the last bastard's side, cracking an armor plate in the process. He collapsed backward, rolling over the flatbed walls and falling away with barely a sound.

As I looked around at the other soldiers, confirming that neither of them were getting up, I turned back to the cab just in time to watch Tessa push the driver's corpse out of the door, slamming it shut. I bent over slightly, about to climb into the cab.

"I just remembered, Tessa, you don't know how to drive," I said, starting to climb into the front seat. "Move over and-"

My next words were lost as suddenly, Tessa hit the accelerator, and we were moving. I was torn free from what little progress I had made to climb inside, stumbling back as we dipped downwards. I managed to stop myself from flying off the back, only to feel weightless as we plummeted downwards, aiming directly for the older-style hover car. When Tessa pulled up, I slammed back down, hitting the cab *again*. This time, I slammed my axe into the roof, the black punching through and hooking inside the hole, giving me just a bit more of a handhold.

"How-?!" I shouted over the whipping, tearing wind, cutting off with a shout as we wove around a slower-moving vehicle. "How do you know how to drive!?"

"Your brothers video games!" She shouted back, only to accelerate harder, somehow getting more speed from the old hover truck. "Hold on!"

We dove again, going under a smaller car, getting close enough that I had to duck. I cursed loudly as we rose back up, only to swerve around even more hovercars. I could feel the truck struggling to keep up with what Tessa was putting it through, the vibrations of the struggling lifters and thrusters making the flatbed vibrate more and more violently.

"Come on, come on..." I chanted to myself, willing the vehicle to go on.

Ahead of us, I could see the hover car that had taken my brother. It was driving along surprisingly slow, making a beeline for the ring of buildings that made up the wall between Outer and Inner York City. The fact that it was going so slow could only mean it was trying to seem inconspicuous and most likely had no idea we were coming.

As we got closer and closer, I realized we had a problem. Tessa was *somehow* getting a lot more from this old truck than I thought was possible. But the second they realized we were after them, they would take off, and we had no hope of keeping up with them.

"Tessa, get above them!" I called out. "Don't be so aggressive! Just fly over them like you're getting in formation."

"What? Why?" She called back. "Don't you want to catch up?"

"We will!" I responded. "And then I'm going to jump!"

## Chapter 33

"WHAT?" Tessa shouted, loud enough to temporarily overpower the whipping wind. "You're going to fucking *what?!*"

"I'm going to jump!" I responded. "If you ram the car, you might knock it out of the sky. If they notice we are here, we won't be able to keep up! Just drive normally and get over it!"

"That.... Goddammit, FINE!"

The truck slowed, and we leveled out, staying above the hovercar vehicle as we caught up, now at a much slower rate. Eventually, we passed over the barrier between Inner and Outer York City, the transition obvious as the air quality dropped noticeably. I coughed, surprised at just how bad the air felt as I breathed in. For a moment, I was stuck between frustration that lowies were forced to breathe this all the time and understanding why most nobles refused to venture out of their cities. I quickly pushed the distraction to the side, focusing on our target.

Not long after we overtook the vehicle, Tessa lowered the truck some more, and I looked down over the edge of the flatbed. The drop was about fifteen feet, but the fact that both of the vehicles were still hundreds of feet in the air made it seem like an impossibly long distance.

"I'm going!" I shouted. "Follow us as best you can!"

"Good luck!" She shouted, looking over her shoulder at me. "And don't you dare fucking die!"

I smirked and nodded before leaning down and diving at the hover car. I dropped like a rock, the distance between me and my target disappearing in a second or two. I slammed into the roof, rolling until I managed to slam my axe into the metal body of the hover car, my legs dangling off the back end. Knowing I only had a second, I yanked out my axe and slammed it in again, putting my hand into the first hole and holding on as hard as I could.

As I predicted, the car immediately tried to dislodge me, swerving and nose-diving hard enough that I could feel myself becoming weightless again. I held on for dear life, the rough hole I had made cutting my hand and fingers as the car kept moving erratically. Suddenly, it went from nose-diving to lifting up, slamming against the metal bodywork. I coughed as the air was driven from my lungs.

Finally, after a long minute of holding on, my body aching and my fingers burning, the car seemed to give up, orienting itself downward again. I took a peek downward and realized we were entering the warehouse district of Outer York City. Suddenly, the car swerved a final time, diving and slipping into the wide open door of a large, mostly empty warehouse. I had to jump off to keep my legs from being crushed as they skidded on the concrete. Luckily, the drop was only a few feet, but I still tumbled and rolled before skidding to a stop.

I quickly climbed to my feet, already walking to the now stopped vehicle, gripping my axe tightly. Suddenly, the door was flung open and someone all but flew out of the car. It was a woman, dressed in the same tactical-looking, face-hiding gear as the others. She came at me in a rush, but as far as I could tell, she was unarmed. Still, I raised my axe up to defend myself, only to almost drop it in shock when she pulled off her mask to reveal a face I hadn't seen in years. My older sister.

"Amanda!?"

"What the fuck are you fucking doing!" She shouted, closing the last bit of distance and thumping my chest. "Are you out of your fucking mind? Jumping on us like that, you're lucky I convinced them to stop trying to shake you off! Always so impulsive, do you think that you're invincible just because you've got a few upgrades? What would Mom do-"

The sudden appearance of my long-lost sister and the massive shift from expected violence to suddenly being yelled at threw me for a loop, putting me firmly on the back step. It was then that Olivia was *dragged* out of the vehicle, manhandled by a soldier whose face was still covered. The soldier was armed, a pistol held in his hand, held at the ready. It wasn't pointed at anyone, but the fact that Oliver had appeared and was still trying to yank her arm free from the soldier's grip finally shocked me free of my mental stun.

"SHUT UP!" I shouted, my sister taking a step back as I stepped forward. "Just shut the fuck up! You have thirty goddamn seconds to explain *exactly* what the fuck is going on here before I assume the worst and start solving problems!"

Whether it was the sudden, menacing step, the bloody, dripping axe in my hand, or maybe she saw just how serious I was being, Amanda went completely silent, her face paling slightly. Either way, she seemed to realize there were more important things to discuss.

"Leon, Olivia was never in any danger," She assured me, visibly biting back her frustration. "We were going to take advantage of a clause in your contract, then let her go."

"What clause?" I demanded. "And who the fuck is 'we'?"

"The clause that says the company has to do everything in their power to help should your new job put your family in danger," She explained. "I don't know how you were able to negotiate such a liberal contract, but you have them over a barrel."

"You kidnapped Olivia, blew up a room she was *in*, and nearly killed Mom just so you could get a ransom?"

I was barely controlling myself, when I heard the sound of a crash coming from outside. I looked over my shoulder to see that Tessa had roughly landed the truck by the front entrance and was now sprinting towards me, her pistol out. She silently stopped next to me, her pistol pointed at the ground but ready to raise at any moment.

"What the hell is going on?" She asked. "A lot more talking than I thought you'd be doing."

"Tessa, this is Amanda," I explained, looking back at my sibling. "My long-lost sister still hasn't answered my questions."

"She was never in any danger. We were sure of that," She insisted. "As for who... I work with th-"

"Captain!" The soldier, still holding onto Olivia's arm, shouted. "This isn't part of the plan!"

"I'm aware, Joseph," She fired back, frustration leaking into her voice. "The situation has clearly changed! Leon... we are the Lowborns. Rebels fighting the nobles."

"Ha! I knew there would be some somewhere," Tessa said smugly. "I knew not everyone would just accept it."

"They kidnapped my sister to use as a ransom," I explained, rolling my eyes. "Not exactly the noble freedom fighters you insisted would exist."



"We need to fund the movement somehow," She explained. "There is no telling what we could squeeze out of BA Entertainment using the contract as leverage."

"Your little sister. Using your little brother as leverage," I corrected. "Not only did you abandon us when we needed you the most, but you came back and used us to make some money for your rebellion."

"It's better than letting them turn you into their little gladiator toy!" She fired back. "I left because what they did to our family was inexcusable! I left to try and stop it from happening again!"

"I did what I had to do to save our family!" I shouted back, taking another step forward. "Olivia was wasting away, struggling to survive and in constant pain! I saw an opportunity to save her, give Tyler a chance to thrive, and give Mom a break before she worked herself to death!"

"By selling out to the people who caused the problem in the first place!"

"By selling out? Do you honestly think that matters? Are you out of your fucking mind?" I asked, struggling to understand why she wouldn't understand. "I'm not happy about what I had to sign up for, sure. But if you think for a second that I wouldn't do worse for less if it meant giving our family a chance, then you are out of your fucking mind!"

She was silent for a while, staring at me. Part of my mind noted that she was looking up at me slightly. The last time I saw her I was pretty sure she was slightly taller than I was.

"Dad-"

"Dad would be disappointed in you," I cut her off, my statement hitting her like a physical blow. "He always put the family first, no matter what. He wouldn't have been happy about what I've had to do, but he would have been proud that I stepped up to do it. Can you say the same?"

I gestured behind her, and she turned. Olivia was weakly struggling now, dirty and scratched up, with blood under her nose. I could see a bruise forming on her arm where the soldier was holding onto her. When she looked back, the confident look she had been wearing was starting to crack. I met her eyes, refusing to back down for an inch. Eventually, she faltered and let out a long sigh.

"Joseph. Let her go," She said, shaking her head.

"Captain! They killed more than half the team!" The soldier responded. "We-"

"And you think for some reason they will let you go if you try and take Olivia?" She pointed out. "Just let her go. This... this was a mistake."

I watched the soldier closely, waiting to see how he would react. Tessa had her pistol trained and ready, though in all honesty, I had no idea what it would do to the armor he was wearing or if the people who had cleaned the gun for her had even returned the pistol with its ammo.

After a few tense seconds, the soldier finally released Olivia, who immediately sprinted across the gap, passing Amanda and standing behind me. I patted her shoulder and looked back up at my sister, who was watching our sister, regret forming on her face.

"I'm sorry Olivia. I promise you that you were never in danger, and I never would have let anyone hurt you," She said. "The nobles just needed to be convinced you were actually kidnapped."

"She was kidnapped," I responded, cutting off any response from Olivia. "You had no right to take her, even if we are related. Even if you hadn't abandoned us."

"I didn't abandon you." She said, shaking her head. "I sent Mom money when I had anything to spare. I hated leaving, but someone needed to do something! Someone needs to stop them."

"You can use whatever mental gymnastics you want. It doesn't change the fact that Mom and I were forced to work ourselves to the bone. Even then, we were barely making enough to keep a roof over our heads, food in the cabinets, and keep Olivia alive. Having someone else to help would have made everything easier. Mom and I wouldn't have had to skip meals or work multiple shifts daily. Whatever you thought you were doing, you still abandoned us."

She was silent for a long moment, staring back at me before looking away, unable to look me in the eye.

"...Maybe. Maybe it was the wrong choice for me at the time. Maybe I should have stayed and helped," She admitted. "But the movement is important. We can help, we just-"

"Amanda, if your movement exists, it's because some noble out there wants it to exist," I explained, shaking my head. "Maybe they use your existence as a way to sell security, or as an excuse to bend the rules, or who fucking knows. But they know about you, about who you work with, and where you are. And now you tried to fuck with a big-name entertainment company. Not only that, but you tried to kidnap a major celebrity's little brother. Don't be surprised when it starts getting a lot harder to get away with stuff you used to do easily."

"You're not going to....?"

"To rat you out specifically? No. You're my sister. I couldn't," I admitted. "As far as I'm concerned, I let the last few soldiers escape in exchange for them handing over Olivia. Right?"

I looked down at my little brother and then at Tessa, both of them nodding in agreement. I looked back at Amanda, who's eyes were getting teary.

"Thank you. We-"

The sound of distant sirens started to fill the warehouse, cutting off whatever my sister was going to say. Instead, she cursed, shaking her head and starting to put on her mask and headgear before stopping.

"I'll... I'll be in touch," She said before pulling down her mask. "And I'm sorry."

Without another word, she turned and walked quickly past the old hover car and past her fellow rebel. The male soldier hesitated momentarily before following after her, holstering his weapon as he jogged to catch up, another two soldiers climbing from the hovercar and following behind them. Both of them disappeared through a door at the far end of the empty warehouse, the door opening and shutting with a dulled clang of metal.

I waited for a long moment before wiping the blood off my axe and deactivating it, the full-size axe once again shrinking down to the size of a hatchet. Tessa holstered her pistol while I turned around and kneeled down, wrapping my arms around Olivia. She quickly latched on to me, hugging me back tightly as she finally broke down.

## Chapter 34

The few weeks after the kidnapping attempt went by spectacularly fast.

Security around me and my family skyrocketed, going from the bare minimum to keep from attracting attention to a staggering amount of protection. It was a testament to how much money they were making from our "adventures."

Each of us had two bodyguards on hand at all times, all of them living in the building beside ours, with both of them modified to have access to our house through an emergency door. Whenever we left the house, two of the stoic guards would go with us, silently following behind and always close enough to stop any funny business. They were actually a bit off-putting, each of them looking all too similar to be normal. I could tell they were heavily modified as well, their eyes an unnatural color, with thin black lines marking where entire parts of their body had been replaced. Part of me wondered if they were even human because I couldn't imagine a noble voluntarily becoming a bodyguard.

On top of the heavily augmented guards, everyone was given their own serums. Mom had been holding back so far on letting the kids take anything that would permanently change them, but after Olivia was taken, she quickly folded. All of us were given healing and durability serums, as well as special stasis implants that would protect the brain at all costs should our hearts stop. We were even given protective clothes to wear under our normal clothes, which projected improved versions of the protective shields I had over in Alt-Earth. In fact, they ended up giving me several copies of that black and red chest armor, which I started to wear around as well.

Surprisingly enough, it was my mom who started putting her foot down in terms of restrictions on what BA Entertainment was instituting in terms of security. I was all ready to have armed, invisible drones following us around, but Mom said that was too far. Eventually, we agreed that visible drones would follow us when we were outside the house and that that was the last addition.

Of course, that only happened after I explained to Mom who had attempted to kidnap Olivia, and who was with them. At first, Mom refused to believe that it was Amanda, insisting that it must have been a trick, but hearing Olivia talk about her finally convinced her.

Apparently, Amanda had been talking to Olivia for a while, having met her online under a different identity and pretending to be just a random person. Eventually, she admitted that she was her sister, and that explained why she wanted to meet her. Hearing her explain Amanda's plan to "surprise" everyone after being away for so long, hearing how hurt she was that his sister had lied to them, planning to use her for money? It was heartbreaking. By the end of it, I was really questioning myself for letting her go and seriously considering going back to the police and telling them what had really happened.

Thankfully, Ilbryen wasn't just interested in preventing the next kidnapping attempt, but also helping us recover from this one. Ilbryen quickly found one of the best therapists in the city, and Olivia now had weekly appointments. Tyler also started going to her once every other week at the behest of my mom.

Tessa and I both denied the request for us to go. In my mind, there was no point. We were both too hardened for what had happened to affect us, and there was nothing they could do about what would be happening when our break was over. Maybe once we both retired that would change, but for now, we were okay. Besides, we had each other, which was more than enough support for either of us.

It didn't take long after the event happened for footage of the kidnapping attempt to leak to the public. Apparently, most of the skyways around Inner York City were being recorded twenty-four seven, so not only was the initial explosion recorded, but so was my ridiculous jump onto the truck bed, Tessa's even more impressive jump, as well as the fight. A distant following security drone even managed to catch my leap of faith down onto the hover car.

Rather than be disgusted by the rather brutal fight in which Tessa and I pretty much destroyed the Lowborn rebels, my fame skyrocketed. People even made memes of the video, which was horrifying, especially when Mom finally stumbled on them. It took a while to calm her down, though I refused to promise to be more careful.

Unfortunately, our first trip out, where Tessa and I had managed to go shopping without being spotted, immediately proved to be a fluke the next time we went out. Personally, I blamed the four massive bodyguards following us around. I quickly regretted not having specified in the contract that Tessa and I could both take care of ourselves and didn't need bodyguards. Either way, any hope of having a peaceful, private trip in public evaporated when we were swamped while taking an early morning walk. Our only saving grace was that many businesses in the city knew their customers valued their privacy, which meant I could take Tessa on a few dates without the crowds following us into restaurants or other places.

It was very strange having so much attention, but if Ilbryen's warnings were correct, we would just have to get used to it. It may die down if our new peers did well with their first jump to their own Alt Earths, but even then, we would likely stay a fan favorite for a long time. We both ended up spending some time talking to experts about how to best handle certain things that tended to happen to famous people, which was much more helpful than I had expected.

Tessa especially took those lessons to heart and slowly became more and more confident, acclimatizing to her new life. I did my best to help her, but every step was difficult. Eventually, though, she was even able to handle the crowds and excitement that frequently went with the handful of events we had agreed to do for Ilbryen.

Time passed, and seasons changed, the trees and plants around the city changing colors as the temperatures dropped. Tessa pointed out that none of them were actually losing any of their leaves, which meant they were heavily genetically modified, but they still looked nice.

The first pair of our new peers left for their adventure, sent to a world where a virus had decimated the world's population to a fraction of its size. There were no mutants or anything, but the population was a bit more dense than Tessa's home, leading to quite a few dangerous and unstable groups. Tessa and I watched a few of their early shows, skipping the livestream to watch the cut-down abridged episodes. Unfortunately, we quickly realized that between our own experiences and it being a constant reminder of what we would be doing in a few more months, we couldn't even come close to enjoying it.

One of the best parts of being dragged around to the many events Ilbryen planned for us was getting to travel. Unsurprisingly, before taking Ilbryen up on his offer, my family didn't get very many chances to travel. I vaguely remember trips to a run-down water park when I was much younger, and Dad was still alive, but those ended when the park shut down. Olivia, in particular, was extremely excited about visiting different golden cities.

During an event in Europe, Tessa and I took some time to do some solo sightseeing, holding hands as we walked through the streets of Paris, one of the oldest golden cities around. Funnily enough, Tessa couldn't care less about being somewhere many would consider to be the most romantic place in the world. Instead, she happily consumed her own weight in pastries, which admittedly were very good, while we both enjoyed a private cafe, which used cloaking tech to hide its patrons behind a screen. Together, we mocked the pretentious and oddly dressed nobles on the other side of the street as they went about their lives.

During a lull in our conversation, I felt a shift in Tessa's mood, one that I understood and empathized with. It was nearly impossible to enjoy anything when, on the other end, you would end up in an all-new hell, fighting for your life, desperate to survive, all for other people's entertainment.

It was hard to keep from obsessing over it.

"How are we supposed to enjoy anything like this?" Tessa asked, picking apart a raspberry danish with her fingers. "This... it sometimes feels like we are on the slow walk to the executioner's block."

"I know, I can feel it too," I admitted, my calmness clearly not sitting well with my partner. "But it's not the chopping block. Yes, it will most likely be tough and dangerous, but we can make it through."

"Gonna have to find another guide," She pointed out, taking a sip of her coffee just as I did. "I'm not going to know anything about the new world."

I laughed and didn't deny what she had said. I would be lost without her at this point, though it had hardly anything to do with her knowing where we were going anymore. I reached out and took her hand, wiping off the slight smear of pasty filling on her knuckles.

At this point, both of us had talked with Ilbryen about what our next adventure would be, wanting to get any sort of information we could on our destination. So far, we have confirmed the lack of mutants, which was already a massive improvement to Alt Earth. Beyond that, Ilbryen and anyone else we managed to corner either dodged the question or smoothly gave us non-answers. Even Ilbryen's robot seemed to have been coached to not answer even the broadest of our questions. We were promised something different, and that was it.

"I think that finding a guide is a good idea, but we should probably not keep them around for very long," I said. "We got lucky once when they let you come back with me. I'm not sure it would work again."

"...I would have sent you home," Tessa said after a long pause, taking a sip of her coffee. "You know that, right?"

"Not without a fight you wouldn't have," I said with a smirk. "Besides, if they hadn't thought of bringing you on, Ilbryen would have loved the spectacle of me offering to stay behind. People would have eaten the romance up, and that would have gotten him to bring us both home."

She smirked and nodded, obviously confident in how it would have gone down. I could only shake my head.

"Are you worried?" She eventually asked. "About-"

"Yeah. More than I was the first time," I admitted, watching a pair of honest to god blue-skinned nobles walk past, rolling my eyes at the ridiculousness. "When I was sent to your world, I had already achieved my goal. My family was safe, Olivia was healed, and they had enough resources to give them a fair shot at becoming great. At that point, coming back was just a bonus. But now... With you going with me, it's a lot more nerve-wracking."

"Don't you dare even think about asking me to stay behind," Tessa said harshly, giving me a hard look.

For a long moment, I was silent, having considered doing just that. I had spent quite a few hours and even a confidential meeting with my own personal lawyer, trying to find out if it was possible to get Tessa out of her contract. With access to noble medicine, not even a grievous, crippling medical condition would let her out of her contract. There was, of course, one legal way, but as far as I knew, she wasn't interested in being a mother so young. Clearly, she thought I was taking too long to answer because she picked up a sugar cube and hurled it at me, bouncing it right between my eyes.

"God dammit, Leon, I-"

"No, sorry. I won't ask you to stay behind," I said, giving her hand a squeeze again. "As much as it would make this easier... I wouldn't be able to do it without you."

"Damn right you wouldn't," She said. "Where you go, I go."

I couldn't help but chuckle, coughing when my throat caught around something. I looked away for a moment before looking back at Tessa.

"And where you go, I go."

"And where we are going doesn't matter," She continued, suddenly confident. "Because no matter what hell they stick us in, we will be coming home."