

## Chapter 16

It took us forty minutes to get back to the APC, the extra time from Tessa looking around with her new glasses, testing out their limits. Thankfully we didn't get lost, but she did apologize for taking us down the wrong road twice before she eventually put her new gear away. When we finally climbed into the protective shell of the old military vehicle, after refilling out canteens, it was late afternoon, according to the sun. We spent some time unloading what we had found during our initial looting of the four houses, before sitting back at the table. We split a can of peaches, the sweet, syrupy preserved fruit a nice reward for an already successful day.

"Alright... needless to say you proved your point," Tessa said after swallowing a chunk of fruit. "These tech caches are worth gathering. These glasses are impressive and useful as hell, and clearly not what the world was at before it all went to shit. So, as long as we do this smart and you don't expect me to go diving into a visper nest, I'm all in."

As she talked she reached out and offered me her hand. I smiled and nodded, wiping some syrup on my pants before reaching out and shaking it.

"I'm glad to hear it, I'm not sure how long I would last without someone who knows the area helping out."

"From what I've seen you would have made it at least a few days if you kept moving and stayed safe at night," She guessed with a shrug. "Assuming you didn't do anything dumb trying to get a cache."

I chuckled, unable to deny her dark prediction. When we finished the peaches I was about to ask what to do with the empty bowl when Tessa smirked. She poured her canteen into the can, which she had been eating out of until it was three-fourths full. She then covered the top with her hand and shook it carefully, before pouring it back into her canteen. She then took a sip with a smile.

"It's not cold but it's still pretty good," She commented with a smile. "You can do it too, just use your fork to mix it up instead of shaking it."

I followed her direction, pouring the water back into my canteen, managing to only spill a tiny bit. I nodded in appreciation after the first sip. I had, of course, had better, but it was a lot better than just plain lukewarm water. When I was done, Tessa leaned forward and gestured to my arm.

"We should pick our next target," She said simply. "I need to go scaving and hunting a lot, gather enough stuff to have a nice emergency buffer just in case, and make up for winter. And if we are going out, we may as well be grabbing some of your stuff as well."

“Sure, that sounds like a plan,” I agreed with a nod, pulling up the map, marking our location, and zooming out. “We should avoid blue markers for now, and if one shows up when we are on the move we should steer clear. Whatever prevented them from getting it before is going to be more dangerous than what we have seen so far.”

“Because whatever is in the blue caches is more valuable, so they would be more willing to risk danger to gather it. Which means whatever is preventing that must be more dangerous,” Tessa finished, nodding along. “Yeah, I’ve got that figured out, thanks. So we stick to greens and whites until we get something to give us a bigger advantage.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Cool. Then we should head up here tomorrow,” She said, pointing out a green point on the map. “I haven’t been up that way since I did my first sweep of the area and there were a couple of houses up there. Yeah, these ones right here.”

She drew a circle around a couple of buildings marked out on the map. They were in the same general direction as the green reward.

“These should be our main looting target, but since there are two of us we should investigate most of what we stumble across,” She explained. “If we are really lucky we might find you something to sleep on that isn’t caked with mold.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” I responded, nodding along. “It’s only been one night and I can already feel it. How did you get a whole mattress?”

“Pure luck,” She said with a smirk, leaning back in her chair. “There is a delivery truck about a five-minute walk from here. I cracked it open and there was mattress all rolled up tight on its way to some poor bastard.”

“Wait, a delivery truck, full of stuff?” I asked skeptically. “Why was someone out making deliveries?”

“Well... I don’t know exactly, I wasn’t born yet,” She admitted with a shrug. “But according to my Gran, the Collapse happened at different rates in different places. Some places had time to evacuate, like the city, while other places got rolled over by some disease or illness that killed the whole town in hours. It all depended on what mutated horror struck them first. Though the mutated diseases were apparently what wiped out most people.”

“Those still a problem?” I asked.

“Sorta? Occasionally one will wipe out a town, it’s happened... maybe twice since I was a kid?” Tess explained, after taking a sip from her canteen. “But humanity is too spread out now

for them to wipe out the millions they did before the Collapse. Anyway, my best guess is that the driver was a loony.”

“Loony? Like crazy?” I asked.

“Yes, but specifically someone who went crazy around the Collapse,” She explained with shrug. “Think about it, whole cities were dying overnight, animals and plants were mutating into horrible deadly abominations and the world was crumbling. Not surprised a few people cracked, tried to pretend nothing was happening. I’d say all of them are dead by now, but my Gran would tell stories about them.”

“That’s... Horrifying... and understandable,” I admitted, looking down at my canteen, swirling the peach-flavored water inside. “I can’t imagine the strain that would put people under.”

We were quiet for a long while, my mind wondering over the chaos this world must have been in during that time period. Eventually, we decided that we would head to bed early, and wake up accordingly to take advantage of the morning calmness. Tessa admitted that a lot could have changed since she was last in that area, but she was confident that we could at least escape anything that could have moved in.

When we were done planning for the night I remade my bed and between the storage shelves in the far back of the APC. I was asleep almost immediately.

The next morning was a rush to get out into the abandoned town, wanting to spend as much time traveling during the morning calmness as possible. I once again questioned the validity of the morning actually being calmer or if Tessa had just fallen into some sort of old wives tale or superstition, but she insisted it was true.

We made good time, heading in almost the exact opposite direction as the previous day, spending about an hour making our way through the town. We stopped at an intersection where two cars had collided during the collapse and were now covered in moss and vines. On a hunch, I used my axe to cut away the green and brown vines around the back end of both cars while Tessa went through the front ends. The first trunk was filled with rotted clothes and other ruined things, probably remnants of what a family gathered before evacuating. The other trunk had plenty of junk as well, but it also had a rolled-up tool kit that was pretty comprehensive as far as I could tell. It was missing a few tools to my eyes, but considering the tech gap that was to be expected.

“That’s a great find,” Tessa said when she saw it. “New tools are always in demand, and a full kit like that will get snatched up real quick.”

“You don’t have a use for it?” I asked, sealing the tools back up.

“No, I have the basics back at the APC but I’m not really the maker type. I did the demo in the APC when I first moved in, and cut some small holes for a chimney and stuff, and put together the shelves, but I buy most of the other stuff I need. Do you want it?”

“...Maybe. I have some experience fixing stuff but I don't know if it will apply out here,” I admitted, passing the tools to Tessa.

“Ah, Scifi boy doesn't know how to fix our primitive technology.” She teased, putting the tools and whatever she found on the back seat of one of the cars, hiding it under half-rotted and falling apart clothes. “We can grab these on the way back, no reason to be lugging everything around.”

I rolled my eyes at her joke but didn't correct her, mostly because she was at least partially correct. I was most definitely spoiled by the tech of home, I didn't think I would have access to self-welding paste or heat-cut markers.

We made our way through the town until we reached our first real stop, two rows of houses, three on each side. One of them was a burnt-out husk, while another was half-collapsed with a truck of some kind embedded in one of the corners. After a few moments break, we headed to the first house, Tessa stopping me by the front steps.

“Okay, so yesterday was a trail run, today we are scaving for real,” She said, unclipping her hatchet, holding it in her off-hand. “Food is important, and our main priority, but anything we can trade for more food is also worth grabbing. The basic rule is anything that you're surprised to see is probably worth grabbing. Clothes are everywhere so they are hardly worth touching, but a nice leather jacket is surprising so it's worth grabbing. Pocket knives are all over the place, but a combat knife is surprising and worth grabbing... get the pattern?”

“Yeah, makes sense. I assume jewelry is useless?”

“Eh... usually it's not worth grabbing unless it's something crazy, but to be honest I don't know the first thing about jewelry so I usually make a note of anything crazy and leave it. Working watches on the other hand are worth a lot. Sundials are annoying.”

We entered the first house and she sent me upstairs while she investigated the bottom floor. I was pretty sure it was a test to see how much stuff I could find, but I was happy to prove myself. Besides, it wasn't exactly rocket science. Shit that could be useful got taken, and shit that wasn't was left behind.

I climbed the stairs and entered the first room and quickly got to work, starting with the desk in the far corner. There was a computer on it, but that wasn't worth anything without power. I went through the desk, looked under the bed and finally searched the closet, before moving on to the next room. Eventually, I cleared out the entire second floor, gathering everything worth wild and heading back down. In all, I found two watches, one pink with some sort of cartoon

animal on it, the other metallic and much heftier feeling. I found a first aid bag and a bottle of expensive-looking whiskey in the largest room's closet, as well as a black duffel bag. In the first room, I found a compass, which took a minute for me to recognize from the compass app on my chip, as well as a few lighters, a much cheaper-looking bottle of alcohol, and a bag of glowsticks. In the room I found the pink watch in, I found a violin, which seemed to be in good condition. I really didn't know much about the instrument, but I knew they could be expensive.

I put all my finds on the kitchen table, which was already stacked with jars and cans, as well as a bag of something I didn't recognize. Tessa came back, carrying a book and a bag full of what looked like candles.

"What's a banana?" I asked, holding up a bag that was labeled "Banana Chips".

"It's a fruit, looks like that," She said, pointing to the sticker on the large bag. "They dry them and I think maybe fry them? I don't know, but with DMAS they just about last forever."

"DMAS?"

"Yeah, it's what they add to canned stuff to make it stable past just the normal several years. It was something new just before the Collapse," She explained with a shrug. "Fuck if I know what it is, but Grandpa said the guy who invented it is the only reason there are any humans around anymore."

"Huh... I guess I just never asked," I said, lying by omission.

I knew canned stuff back home could last for a century or so before the inner lining began to fail, but I wasn't sure how it worked here.

"Yeah, it took us a few years before we had stabilized enough to survive winters without pre-Collapse food," She continued, picking up a can and inspecting it. "According to Grandpa at least. My mom was technically alive at the tail end of that point but she doesn't remember it."

"Well... I'm glad that it's all still good, but why are these chips okay, but the other food looks like it might talk back if I say hello?"

"Because it didn't work on a lot of dry food," Tessa responded easily. "Most in fact. The stuff it does work on was packaged in sturdier packaging instead of the biodegradable stuff everything else was."

As she talked Tessa had a wistful look on her face for a moment, chuckling to herself. After a while she shook her head, turning back to me.

“Sorry, just had a blast from the past,” She said, her face still looking nostalgic and wistful. “I was just remembering having similar conversations with my family. Asking questions was kind of my thing when I was younger. Grandpa would call me Mrs. Why.”

She turned her focus back onto the table and started going over what I had found. She was surprised I had done so well and admitted she had planned on going up there after me to see what I had missed. I assured her it was probably a good idea, and that it would be a good way for me to learn if I watched her search the room.

She agreed and spent about fifteen minutes giving each room a once-over. She managed to find a box that was tucked up under the large bed in the largest room, which turned out to be a fully stocked fishing supplies box and an unopened collapsible rod.

“Other than this, you did a good job,” She assured me when we got back down to the kitchen. “I almost missed the tackle box as well.”

We spent a few minutes packing everything together, filling the duffle bag I had found first, and putting the last few cans into our bags before hiding the extra bag by the stairs. With one house down, we moved to the next one.

## Chapter 17

We went through all of the houses over the next few hours, the sun rising to its highest point as we cleared each home. We found a lot of stuff for trade, some cans of food, and a few bags of dry food as well. About halfway through I checked my map and spotted a white crate in a nearby backyard.

A quick look around and the map led us to what had once been a pool but was now a small swampy pond. It smelled horrible, and sitting in the center on a pile of natural debris was a white cache, no bigger than a foot wide and half as deep. I let out a groan and was about to step into the water when Tessa grabbed me and pulled me back.

“Yeah, bad idea.” She said, shaking her head and peering into the disgusting water. “Who knows what lives in that.”

“Seriously?” I asked, following her look. “What’s the worst that could be in a pool this small?”

“Flesh-eating parasites that slowly consume your brain and turn you into a mindless angry husk.” She answered easily, before looking at me and smirking. “Or just some mosquito spawn, but stagnant water isn’t worth the risk. Anything enclosed like this is dangerous,

mutations happen really quickly for insects and smaller stuff, especially in an environment like that. Look right there.”

She pointed down and to the left, having spotted something I clearly missed. It took a second for me to spot it, but there was definitely a black-stained skull sitting on the top of the mucky water. It wasn't human, but it wasn't small either.

“Holy fuck...” I said, taking a step back.

“It was probably desperate for water,” Tessa explained, shrugging nonchalantly. “Seems like a bad idea to go swimming in anything that can do that.

“So how do we get it?” I asked, tearing my eyes away from the double fist-sized skull, looking around for a moment before spotting a shed tucked up in the corner of the overgrown backyard.

Tessa followed my look and nodded.

“Okay, you try and figure this out, I'm going to finish clearing this house. I saw a hunting magazine on the counter so fingers crossed we find something nice.”

With a pat on my shoulder, she turned and headed back inside the house, leaving me to my own devices. I cursed myself internally. I should have known better. The fact that the crate was here meant it was dangerous in some way, so the fact that I couldn't see anything should have set me on edge, not reassured me. I shook my head and headed to the shed.

The door was locked with a chunk of metal, but the metal pieces that were screwed into the door didn't stand a chance when I slammed my axe in and pried it off. I held my axe at the ready and pulled the door open and stepped back, ready to react to anything charging out at me.

When nothing came I relaxed slightly, looking around in the shed. There was a decent amount of equipment and machines inside, along with tools hung up on the wall. I spent a few minutes going through everything inside, eventually deciding that the tools probably weren't worth much. I did, however, find a long piece of metallic pipe that I took back to the edge of the pool and used to slowly coax the white crate closer. After a few minutes, I finally got it close enough to grab, pulling it out of the foul-smelling water and onto the concrete walkway around the pool.

I contemplated opening it immediately but decided to instead head inside and grab a rag, wiping the box down carefully. Just as I was about to open the crate I heard a whoop of excitement coming from upstairs. Not long after that Tessa came back down carrying a three-foot-long polymer case.

“Oh, you got it, great, we can do a show and tell,” She said, putting her case on the table and popping it open.

Nestled inside the rather well-built case was some kind of bow. I recognized it from movies and in history classes, but I didn't recognize this particular kind.

“I was right, whoever lived here was a hunter,” She said with a grin, reaching into the case and pulling out the bow. “This is a compound bow, and from what I can tell it's in almost perfect shape! It even has all the bells and whistles! I've been looking for something like this for ages!”

“What about your gun?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me? I can't hunt with that, way too expensive.” She explained, shaking her head. “Well, the bullets are at least. The gun is just kinda sorta valuable.”

She started examining the bow, testing it, and pulling the string back before slowly releasing it back down. When she was done checking the bow out she started going through the case itself.

“A pack of replacements tips, extra fletching, extra cordage for the bow, a few replacement parts, holy hell this is the motherload. This is worth enough food for a whole winter, Leon.” She said with an excited grin. “This just made hunting and defending ourselves a hell of a lot easier.”

“Why? I mean I know it's a weapon but how is it better than your gun?”

“Because ammo is scarce as hell, I've been scaving for five years now at this point and I've found three, maybe four boxes of different types, including these,” She explained, gesturing to the bullets on her belt. “Gran and Granda blamed it on this area being harsh on gun control even before the US started cracking down on firearms. Not that I know what most of that means, really.”

As she talked she pulled out four arrows, checking them closely before clipping them to the side of the bow and pulling out some sort of strap system. She pulled it around her shoulders, before shutting the case and clipping the bow to the strap system, under her arm. When she was done she turned to me and gestured to herself, bow hanging by her side, under her arm at just above hip level.

“Well?” she asked, turning in place.

“Looks good, a solid find,” I said with a nod. “Anything we can use to protect ourselves is a win in my book. You know how to shoot it properly?”



“Yeah, my dad had something similar,” She explained. “I can shoot it just fine.”

I nodded, before waving my arm close to the tech cache, breaking its seal. I was going to make a comment about her giving me the gun, just in case, but I wasn't sure that would be received very well. We seemed to be meshing well so far, for the two days I had known this complete stranger, but I wasn't sure just how far that would go.

I opened the container and frowned, pulling out a large thin blanket. I scanned it with my wrist projector and shook my head, chuckling.

“Looks like you took our luck,” I said, showing her the info my projector was giving me about the find.

“... A blanket?” She asked, looking a bit dumbfounded. “Your special, high-tech cache is a really nice blanket?”

“Well, it says it will adjust for how hot it is... But yeah, pretty much,” I responded, folding it up and tucking it back into my bag. “They can't all be winners.”

We finished looting the houses, grabbing anything worth anything, stacking it outside, hiding the piles as best we could. We definitely found way more than we could carry, but making two trips to such a close neighborhood was fine, as long as we got back to the APC at a reasonable time.

Once everything was set we headed off, making a beeline for the green cache. I checked the map frequently, and at one point a blue crate appeared out of nowhere. By pure luck I happened to be looking at the map when it appeared, meaning it was just about three hundred meters away. I grabbed Tessa's armor and motioned her to be silent, directing her to my map. She cursed under her breath.

Slowly, with our heads on swivels, we made our way to some cover, hiding along a broken-down fence and a large empty garage of some sort. When we were in cover we looked at the map again.

“Any idea what it could be?” I asked quietly, keeping an eye out.

“No, not a clue. Is there any chance that people just missed one and this is safe?” She asked, silently pulling an arrow out and getting her bow ready.

“...No, that would be very unlikely.”

“Okay, then we have three choices. We go around, cutting around by at least as much distance as we have right now,” She explained, looking up over the fence for a moment.

“Second option is we head back, spend the rest of the day getting everything back to the APC and figure out a different cache to go after.”

“What about number three?”

“We go after it,” She said, leaning against the wall of the garage. “Or at least investigate closer.”

“That... seems like a pretty bad idea,” I said, shaking my head. “I thought the plan was to stock up on greens and then go after some blues when we were confident we could handle them.”

“Yeah... Yeah, your probably right,” She said, shaking her head. “But what if I got up in a tree and scouted the area with these?”

She tapped her glasses, and I couldn't help but chew on my lip. This could end very badly, but it would be entertaining, and nothing in this hell world was really safe. Eventually, I sighed and nodded.

“Okay, but let's stay nice and far away,” I said. “I don't want to risk pissing off whatever makes this cache dangerous.”

“Don't worry, I might be greedy for cool stuff but I'm not stupid,” She pointed out, looking around before pointing to a copse of trees about two hundred feet away. “It looks like there are some tree's over there, C'mon.”

I followed behind the experienced scaver, nervously looking around as we made our way to the trees as quietly as possible. When we arrived at the shaded area, Tessa unclipped her bow and handed it to me. She rubbed her hands before looking at me and winking.

“Catch me if I fall, yeah?”

She was climbing before I could comment, practically scurrying up the branches. Before long she was almost completely obscured from my angle. I opened my mouth to call up to her before cursing softly under my breath. Being loud would probably be a really bad idea. I waited impatiently for her, the wind shifting slightly as I looked around nervously.

It was a good five or so minutes before she started making her way back down, this time going much slower. When she dropped the last few feet to the ground I handed her weapon back to her, which she gratefully took.

“Alright, so first things first, much more difficult,” She said quietly, leaning against the tree she had just descended. “It's a pack of skelly-wolves.”

She waits for my reaction, but I only stare back at her. After a moment she slaps her forehead and groans.

“Right, okay. They are kinda like wolves but they have extra bone plates around their torso. And on their heads,” She said, frowning and shaking her head. “I could take one down with my pistol, but I doubt I have enough ammo. They are vicious bastards, so we should-”

The trees shifted slightly in the wind, the leaves rustling slightly in the breeze. It was a surprisingly soothing sound, but Tessa paled almost immediately, standing quickly.

“When did the wind change direction?” She asked, looking around almost manically. “Fuck, it’s blowing toward them, we need to go, we-”

Before she could continue the sound of howling wolves echoed around us, freezing us in fear. We both pushed through the surprise at the same time, and we both broke out into a run, darting back along the road with Tessa in the lead.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as we ran, Tessa heading into the street

She immediately climbed up onto the broken down and burnt-out car that was laying in the road, helping me jump up as well.

“They hunt by scent, lots of mutants do,” She explained. “And the wind shifted towards them. They-”

Another howl echoed through the relatively large clearing, both of us nervously looking around. Tessa slapped my shoulder and pointed out a singular creature breaking the treeline. It was wolf-like, but its body was weirdly proportioned. Its legs were longer than a normal wolf, and a set of sharp spines ran along its back. There were several plates of bone-like armor on its body, with matted fur pushing out in between.

It immediately snarled and growled at us, its eyes locked on and staring us down.

Before I could say anything acknowledging that I saw it, a second wolf stepped out into the light. Nervously I looked around and spotted two more to the left of the car, and another two to the back right.

“They already have us surrounded,” I said to Tessa, nodding to the additional mutants.

“Fuck. Watch them closely, you gonna have to take them out when they charge,” She said, before unclipping her new bow and tossing it into a patch of overgrown grass. “I’m going to try and take out as many as I can with my pistol, but I doubt I’m going to get all six.”

“Gotcha. I’ve got your back,” I said, hefting my ax in a tighter grip.

“Good. Wait for the-”

Before she could finish all of the mutated dogs charged, barking and snarling as they sprinted toward the car.

## Chapter 18

The wolves bolted towards us faster than I thought possible, their long legs folding and moving in ways that made me queasy to watch. I watched as the two that Tessa put me in charge of taking down made a beeline for us, doing my best to put the others out of my mind.

I nearly fell off the trunk of the car when the loud bang of her pistol echoed from behind me. It startled the dogs as well, who hesitated for a moment before rushing towards us again. Tessa fired again and again, and I could hear the yowls and whines of the dogs she had shot so far.

Again I focused on the charging dogs, cursing under my breath as one jumped up to bite at me, having reached the car. I kicked at it, cursing as it ducked and attempted to bite me again. This time I swung my ax, an awkward swing that still managed to connect. The mutated canine yelped, falling off the back of the car in a pained roll, quickly getting to its feet. Its partner filled the gap though, immediately jumping up, chomping dangerously close to my arm. I held the ax with one hand on the bottom and the other just under the metal head, jabbing down at the slathering animal, knocking it in the head as well.

Two more shots echoed behind me, followed by a curse, before I managed to finally catch one of the wolves with a serious blow, swinging the ax and slamming it in a gap between its organic bone plates that protected its back. The wolf's back end suddenly went limp and it rolled off the car, yelping, and barking as it tried to move.

With a triumphant shout I swung against the second wolf, knocking it off the car truck and-

The air was driven from me as a canine-shaped missile tackled me off the car. It seemed to take minutes for both of us to smash into the ground, both of us rolling before I managed to get up on one knee. Somehow a wolf had managed to sneak around and tackle me to the ground. As I stood up to my feet I cursed loudly, staring down the new wolf that was in between me and the car. Before I could even think about grabbing the ax, which had landed a few feet from me, the second, uninjured canine I had been fighting before, tackled me to the ground.

I raised my arm, the wolf latching onto it, chewing on my arm. I could feel him struggling to tear through the cloth, which told me that if I hadn't been wearing my special jacket it would already be tearing chunks from me.

I yanked out the knife that Tessa had gotten me the day before and started stabbing the slobbering, mutated canine. More than a few times the knife bounced off an armor plate, but when I managed to find a gap I cut it as deeply as I could. I could feel it getting weaker when I heard Tessa shout out a surprisingly close "No!" and felt a second set of jaws wrap around my leg.

I yelled, even as I finally managed to stab the wolf that had me pinned right in the eye. I could feel it punching through the thin bone behind the eye, carving into the brain behind it. Immediately it went limp, forcing me to roll it off me, even as another wolf chewed on my leg.

I finally pushed the dead dog off of myself, still screaming, just in time to watch Tessa slam her machete into its skull, cracking its bone plate. The dog, surprisingly, let go of me to defend itself, only for Tessa to swing again and get lucky, her blade sinking halfway through its neck as she managed to hit right between a gap between the plates.

The mutated monstrosity, its jaws still wet with my blood, jerked a few times as it went through its death throes before it finally went limp, Tessa's machete still stuck inside it.

Tessa looked around, both of us silently listening for more mutated wolves. As she looked she also quickly reloading her pistol, only holstering it after she had scanned the entire area. I turned and slide against the car, leaning my back against it.

"Fuck, that hurts," I said, as Tessa kneeled down beside me.

Wordlessly she pulled out her own knife and quickly cut the bottom half of my pant leg off, revealing a series of bloody cuts and tears.

"I really hope your right about being immune to infections," She said, shaking her head.

As she talked she pulled out her canteen and poured the water over my wounds so she could inspect them. They were gruesome, and the water burned as it washed away the blood, but even I could see they could be worse. She pulled out a ragged bandage and wrapped my leg up.

"Those need to be stitched shut," She said as she finished the wrapping. "Otherwise they are just going to keep opening. You might heal quickly, but not that quick."

"Yeah, okay. Can you do it?" I asked, and she nodded on response.

"I can if you don't mind amateur stitching," She admitted with a shrug. "I could bring you into a town but... the nearest one might not help you if you're with me."

"As long as you can do it right I don't care," I said, shaking my head before looking. "So are there going to be more skelly-wolves coming or...?"

"No, I think we killed the pack," She responded, looking to my right, toward the front of the car.

Sure enough, there were five bodies, one more than we had originally seen. Between the one I had killed, the one I disabled and it was still currently moving around, partially paralyzed, there were eight mutants in total.

"This is a pretty big pack already, I spotted the extra two around their den, they must have come running when they heard the barking," She explained, standing up slowly.

She walked over to the dog that her machete was still stuck in, putting her foot on its head and yanking her weapon out. She then made her way around the car and put the last mutant out of its misery.

"Dammit," I said, as I used the car to pull myself.

My leg burned as I put weight on it, threatening to give out with every step. I grabbed some more bandages from my pack, before taking off my jacket. I laid the jacket on the car, before rolling up a bloody and torn sleeve to show off the teeth marks that dotted my arm.

"A bit worse than those displacers bastards, huh?" I said, Tessa turning back to see my bloody arm. She cursed and rushed back.

"Dammit, they got through your jacket?" She asked taking my arm and examining it.

The damage wasn't nearly as bad as it looked, as quickly washing the blood off showed that it was just a series of shallow punctures, rather than the tearing wound that was currently making it very hard to stand. Tessa quickly wrapped it up, and I put my jacket back on over it.

"So... How well can you walk?" She asked, looking me up and down.

"Not very well...I think I'm stuck to hobbling for now."

I tested out my leg again, wincing and clenching my teeth as the pain spiked again. Tessa saw this and ran over to the woods again, returning shortly after with a crude crutch, basically just a branch with a "Y" on one end. She quickly measured it and trimmed it down, before testing it again.

“Better?” She asked, and I nodded in confirmation.

“Yeah, it's tolerable for now.”

“Good, because I'm going to grab the blue cache, and then we are going to head back.”

“What? Are you sure that's a good idea?” I asked, wincing as I shifted my leg wrong.

“Yes, I'm sure. We killed the bastards, might as well have what they were 'guarding,’” She explained, pulling out her pistol and handing it to me before adding. “Here, in case we miscounted.”

I nodded and she quickly grabbed her discarded bow and rushed off at a light jog. I nervously looked around, trying to look in every direction at once. About ten minutes went by, and I was starting to get nervous and figure out how I would go after her when she returned carrying a blue briefcase.

“Any problems?” I asked as she got closer.

“Not really. There were a couple of pups that I... well I think you can imagine,” She responded, letting out a huff, handing over the briefcase.

I took it and waved my arm over it, waiting for the familiar sound of a cache unsealing before cracking it open to find two vials inside, both containing blue liquid. I pulled them from the case and tucked them into my breast pocket.

“We can check what they do when we get back,” I said, answering Tessa's curious look.

She reluctantly agreed. We gathered everything and quickly headed out, the pace much slower than before. Eventually, we made it to the houses we had looted, where Tessa gathered as much stuff as she could, filling my pack as well. We gathered everything we couldn't carry, which was much more than we had hoped, and stashed it under a porch.

By the time we got back, the sun was starting to set. Tessa got everything we had scavenged inside, before climbing back down and helping me climb in. By the time I was inside the APC I was pale and sweating from the journey home, including the struggle to get inside.

Once we were enclosed inside, Tessa spent a few minutes getting everything moved around, collapsing the table and setting up a small area to work in before we started the process of stitching my wounds closed. I sat back and did my best not to clench up as she pulled my leg into her lap and slowly began to close the few wounds that needed the help. I was very thankful she had a first aid kit extensive enough to have thread that would dissolve on its own.

“Ever had stitches before?” She asked, trying to keep me distracted as she pushed the curved needle through my skin with a pair of sterilized pliers.

“No, we don't use them anymore,” I explained through a tight jaw. “We used medical glue.”

“I think we did as well before everything went to shit,” She admitted with a shrug. “We either ran out or it went bad because I've never been able to get my hands on a usable bottle.”

“Half tempted to just wrap it up in- OUch!” I started to say, getting cut off when Tessa poked me a bit too hard. She winced and apologized before she continued. “Wrap it up in tape.”

“No, it needs to breath otherwise your skin goes all soft and it has a hard time healing,” She explained.

Over the next hour or so Tessa stitched me together as best she could. It hurt like a bastard, but I managed to suffer through it without too much complaining. When she finally finished and had given my leg a final cleaning, she pulled out a bottle of whiskey and poured me a double.

“Sip it slowly,” She said, putting the bottle away. “It will help you sleep through the night, even when it starts to ache.”

We shifted around a bit, resetting the table and chairs. Well, Tessa did, I mostly just watched her. I had been injured for less than five hours and I was already hating it.

“So, are we going to find out what those vials do?” She asked curiously when she finally settled down, sitting on the edge of her bed. “Don't forget you promised me a healing one.”

“I promised you would get one if we found one, not that we would definitely find one,” I pointed out, pulling the two vials from my pocket. “These aren't the health ones anyway, those are green.”

I scanned the vials quickly, Tessa's eagerness overriding my annoyance with my injury. I pushed up the screen and started reading through the description.

“Well... we have a bit of a decision to make,” I said, putting the self-injecting serum vials on the table. “We are now the owners of two strength enhancement serums.”

Tessa leaned forward and picked one up, studying it closely. I had to admit, the temptation to snatch it back from her was pretty big.

“How strong will one make someone?” She asked, eventually putting the injector down.



“That's a good question. I know it's not zero to Superman in one vial, and I also know that it will be at least noticeable,” I explained with a shrug. “It's also not like... just strength... it's more like body strengthening... the user isn't going to be tougher but it's a whole bunch of small enhancements that result in the person being stronger I guess.”

“Well... There isn't much point for us to split them if the effects are minimal,” She pointed out. “We should test it. You can take one, and if it is a huge leap then I'll take the second one.”

“And if it's small, I'll just take the second one as well?” I asked.

“Yeah, not much point in being slightly, barely noticeably, kinda sorta stronger.” She pointed out, before smirking and continuing. “Besides, that just means I'll get dibs on the next few things.”

“Alright, alright, that works for me. But just to let you know, I'm going to need to eat more for the next few days. And my normal diet will be a bit bigger normally as well.”

“Fuck... Should have seen that coming,” She cursed, looking over at her storage of food, seemingly going over something in her head. “Okay, fine. We will use it tomorrow morning when we can monitor everything more easily. I'll go run back to the neighborhood and grab everything that we left behind.”

“By yourself?” I asked nervously.

“I've been doing this by myself for a long time tough guy, I'm sure I'll survive one light scav trip by myself,” She assured me, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I'll try and get in contact with some people, trade the good we found for fresh food, maybe some jerky or pickled stuff. You can heal up, and then we can decide if we are splitting them or if your gonna be the strongman by yourself.”

“... Right, okay,” I said, nodding in agreement with her general plan.

“Good. Now go the fuck to sleep. I need to finish putting everything away.”

I finished off my drink, already feeling the slight warmth spreading through my stomach. I made my bed, using Tessa's extra blanket as a bit of extra cushion, my jacket as a pillow, and the special blanket we found in the white cache as a... well a blanket. Despite the dull ache in my leg, I fell asleep before Tessa was done putting everything away.

## Chapter 19

The next morning I woke up to a sore and slightly swollen leg. Tessa was already getting ready to head out and get the loot we left behind when I started putting away my bed.

“How do you feel?” She asked while double-checking her pack.

“I feel fine. I think my leg is a little swollen, and it aches obviously but it doesn't look infected,” I assured her, examining my leg as I did.

“Alright. If you start feeling sick... well don't fall asleep,” She warned me.

“Isn't that for concussions?” I asked with a chuckle.

She laughed as well and pushed open the top hatch, pulling herself up and out. I passed her her backpack, which was mostly empty, followed by her brand new bow, arrows already clipped in.

“I'll be gone for like two hours tops,” She said, looking down into the old, rusted armored vehicle. “When I get back you should take the serum.”

“Alright. After two hours I'll come looking for you.”

“Yeah sure, you'll definitely be able to take down whatever took me down,” She said with a scoff. “My guns on the bed in case something goes really wrong. It's got six shots and there are three spare bullets. Those bullets are worth more than everything we have found scavenging together a few times over, so don't waste them.”

I looked over and sure enough, her pistol was resting on her mattress with three bullets stacked next to it. I nodded and looked back up, but she was already closing the hatch. I could hear her crawling down the side of the APC. She slapped the armored side of the vehicle once she was down before leaving me alone.

I let out a long, steady breath, waiting for a while to make sure she was fast gone before looking up. I knew that I had drones following and recording me, but since I had no idea where they were, I just had to guess.

“I know this must be incredibly boring for viewers, watching me wait around and heal,” I said. “So could I propose a solution? If you mark a few reward crates with healing serums, Tessa and I could go out and find them. It would be like a quest of sorts, and it would keep us from having to spend too much time recovering from injuries.”

I silently waited for a response, but when none came I let out an aggravated sigh, before leaning against the interior wall. I spent a few minutes just sitting there before I started looking for something to do. About thirty minutes in I found a book tucked away in one of the containers

Tessa had under a shelf. I cracked it open and sat down in the far back of the APC, using my blankets and my jacket to cushion the hard, cold floor.

After twenty minutes of reading a beep startled me, my legs slapping against a shelf hard enough for me to curse out loudly in pain. After I finally recovered from hitting my injury, and I finished checking to make sure I didn't tear any of my stitches, I tapped my projector, the source of the noise.

It took me a minute to find it, but after scanning around my map for a minute or two I finally noticed that a single green crate was marked with a little plus sign next to it, while a blue one had two marks. The closest was the green, which was over twice the distance away as the Roc nest had been, and the blue was even further than that, in the opposite direction.

"That's perfect!" I said, pumping my fist. "Thanks, Ilbryen, assuming you had anything to do with that. Now I just need a story for why I suddenly know what these caches are... Fuck."

I spent the rest of my alone time trying to puzzle out an excuse, eventually settling one one just a half hour before she returned. During that time I pushed open the hatch and managed to drag myself out, going more than a bit stir-crazy at that point. She came back with a full backpack and two large duffel bags filled with stuff, most of which was for trading rather than keeping.

"Probably not the best idea to be hanging around outside while injured," She pointed out. "This area is pretty cleared out but still."

"I was going crazy being stuck inside with nothing to do," I said with a shrug.

She tossed me the first bag and I carefully lowered it down into the APC, doing the same for the second duffel. Tessa climbed up and we both dropped back inside her first and my second. I somehow managed to avoid hitting or straining my leg this time.

"Alright, I already left a message at the drop point, John will be by to check it in the next few days... hopefully," She said as she settled in, sitting on the edge of her bed. "With any luck he is out hunting right now and will come back and see it, rather than finding it on the way out for a long hunt."

"Can I ask why we can't just go to town?" I asked as I settled down into the seat by the small table.

"The nearest town... is the one I used to live in," She reluctantly explained. "It's not a fun story but... Basically, I wasn't kidding when I threatened you the first night you slept here."

It took me a minute to remember what story she was talking about, my eyes going wide when I did.

“What? Why would they kick you out for defending yourself against assault like that?”

“The guy who did it was the mayor's son. He had a lot of pull and, well plenty of people thought I went too far.”

“Fuck that. He was trying to... force himself on you?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck him then, he had it coming.”

Tessa, who had been looking down, pretending to busy herself with what was in the duffel bag looked up, a small smile on her face, nodding in agreement.

“Yeah... I know. Thanks.”

We finished going through everything, setting aside what Tessa planned on trading, before sitting back around. I was holding the first vial of strength serum, before eventually injecting it in the same way that Ilbryen had injected the healing serum. Where the healing serum had been a deep, immediate pain that faded over time as it spread, this was almost the exact opposite.

At first, it was cold, a soreness spreading out from my leg, my muscles twitching as the ache spread, accompanied by sharp spikes that made me flinch and clench my teeth. By the time the pain had spread to my entire body, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head, I had rolled off of the chair and was laying in the middle of the APC, cursing and groaning as my muscles spasmed.

“Holy fuck, this is really intense,” Tessa commented, kneeling beside me and looking worried. “Are you sure this is okay? Is it working how it's supposed to?”

“I-I-I'm s-s-sure it's FINE!” I manage to choke out, the last part coming out as a shout as the pain reached my spine.

It felt like a spike of iron, soaked in liquid nitrogen was being shoved through my entire spinal column, vertebrae by vertebrae. When it finally reached the top of my neck, I could feel the cold surrounding my skull, reaching my eyes before I finally snapped into unconsciousness.

I came to with a jerk, my entire body was sore, and the coiling cold that seemed to touch every part of my body had almost completely receded. Tessa was still leaning over me, still looking concerned.

“How long was I out?” I asked, slowly pushing myself up.

The soreness was slowly accompanied by and overtaken by fatigue that seemed to fill every single muscle fiber. Even my eyes felt tired.

“A minute maybe, not much more than that. How do you feel?”

“Sore, tired... and hungry.”

“Yeah, whatever the hell that was, it looked like it would take a lot out of you.”

By the time we had the cans open my stomach was growling and the fatigue was getting worse. I had two cans of beans, two cans of preserved meat, and a can of some sort of creamy soup, while Tessa just had her normal.

“That was a lot of food,” Tessa commented once we were both finished. “How long are you going to have to eat like that?”

“A day or so,” I commented sheepishly. “We can do a few days of heavy scaving to cover the cost... And hope we find a metabolism serum.”

“Does that do what I think it does?”

“Yeah. We are going to need some before we start to heavily improve ourselves with serums,” I explained, shaking my head. “Otherwise we won't be able to keep up with our own diet.”

“Damn... how many improvements are we limited to?”

“I think two strengths are our limit,” I answered, sitting at the back end of the APC, leaning against the wall with my blanket and jacket as extra cushioning again. “Healing serums work differently in that we will need to eat more to compensate for the accelerated healing, rather than the constant energy burn.”

“I need to get one of those,” She said, shaking her head. “The fact that you don't have to worry about infection... better than anything I've seen so far. There is no way you would be okay right now without that.”

“About that... I think I managed to find a few of them.”

“What?” She asked, looking at me suspiciously. “I thought you had no idea what was inside the crates?”

“Well... the truth is that this is as much of a test as it is a mission,” I admitted, stamping down the small amount of guilt I felt for lying to her. “I already fucked up with getting injured so soon... I think they noticed and decided I needed help.”

“I’m sorry, a test?” She asked, looking at me like I was crazy. “They sent you here from whatever high-tech paradise you live in, as a test? That is really fucked up.”

“Yeah... sorry,” I said, looking down at my projector implant. “But at least they are giving me a helping hand.”

“Are they likely to give you more help if you fuck up more?” She asked, looking like she had an idea.

“Not likely. I think we got lucky with wanting something they just happened to have information on.”

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes squinted as she studied me. I could tell she wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but after a full minute, she finally shrugged.

“Whatever, it’s a whole lot of not my problem, how do we know where they are?”

I hobbled my way over to her, sitting down at the small table, facing her. I activated my map and showed her the two marked caches.

“Well... I’m hesitant to go after a blue just yet, especially since we have a chance to get me some healing before that,” She said, after studying the projected map for a while. “I say we go after a few more greens, starting with a long trip to this one. We pick up any whites we see on the way, and if we get enough useful stuff, we go after the blue cache that has double serums.”

“I... don’t see anything wrong with that plan,” I admitted, idly wondering if the fact I was just going along with her ideas would make me less entertaining.

“Great. How long until you ready to go out?” She asked. “I want to do some basic scavenging first before heading out to that one.”

“Two days I think,” I guessed, judging from how my leg was feeling. “I won’t be able to really push myself but scavenging should be fine. Plus that gives me time to get used to the strength improvement and see which of us is getting the second one.”

She winced at the mention that she might be going through the same thing I just did, but didn’t deny that she would still do it.

“Alright, that works. I’m going to go scaving by myself tomorrow and the day after, just to see what else I can find,” She explained. “I won’t stay out full the full day, because, with any luck, John will stop by before we both start heading out again. If he shows up when I’m out, just mention that he better have remembered his grandmother’s pickled beets, then tell him that I’ll be back soon, probably around one or two in the afternoon.”

“Alright... is there anything you need to be done around here?”

She thought to herself for a moment before smirking and nodding.

“Yeah, if you’re up for it, cut down some trees,” She said, turning and going through a crate before pulling out a metal and wood hand saw. “Cut them down with your axe before using this to cut them to size. Then split them and stack them in the pile along the back.”

She laid the saw against the cabinet after showing it off to me, and I let out a resigned sigh.

“Damn, alright,” I accepted in defeat. “At least it will give me a chance to test my strength.”

“Yup, totally why I suggested it,” She responded with a chuckle. “Definitely not because it sucks and I’m happy to pawn it off to you.”

We chatted for a bit longer as the sun started to go down, the interior of the APC getting darker and darker. Eventually, I ended up having another can of beans and another tin of preserved meat before we both called it a night.

I managed to fall asleep after an hour or so, the dull soreness through my whole body, and the slow pulsing ache in my leg keeping me up until my exhaustion from the serum finally took me under.

## Chapter 20

I woke up the next morning desperately hungry. I ate just as much as I had for dinner the previous night, as well as another can of preserved meat. I could tell that me eating so much of her preserved, canned food grated on Tessa. I could only hope that I would make it up to her eventually with serums and tech that would help her stay alive in this world.

When we were finished eating Tessa packed up a few things and headed out, promising to be back around noon. I was once again left alone, but today I actually had some goals to accomplish. First was testing out how much my leg had healed. I struggled out of the APC,

bringing my ax and Tessa's pistol with me. I spent some time lightly stretching my leg, testing how it felt and examining how the wound looked physically.

The bloody tears were still slightly swollen, and there was a near-constant ache, but in all honesty, it felt a lot better than I thought it would at this point. When I was sure I wasn't going to tear anything open just by hobbling around I started testing out my strength. I did some sit-ups, and some pull-ups on a nearby tree branch and even picked up a few heavy-looking rocks.

In the end, the change was notable, but not incredible. I could definitely feel that moving and lifting things was *easier*, but it still wasn't *easy*. I was pretty sure I was just touching against what was possible if I trained myself frequently, but I wasn't anywhere strong enough to be really impressive or overly useful in a way that wasn't just convenient. If we wanted to see me benefit in a noticeable way beyond just being baseline improved, I was going to have to take both serums.

About thirty minutes after Tessa left I walked a hundred feet or so from the APC, finding a decent-sized tree. I looked it up and down, checking for anything worrying before I began the process of hacking it down. I had never cut down a tree before, never mind cutting one down nothing but a hunk of metal on the end of a stick, but I had seen it in old movies enough to figure out the basics. And while I had nothing to directly compare it to, it did feel easier than it should have.

The first tree went down in about twenty minutes, the next in fifteen, and the last two took about ten each. After that, I smacked some of the branches off of the trees with my ax, using the saw for the really big and stubborn ones, before dragging everything back to the APC. I took a break for an early lunch, eating another two cans of beans and a can of meat substitute before starting the process of cutting the logs into smaller chunks for splitting.

Before I could even make it through to the second tree Tessa returned, carrying a full bag as well as a single duffel bag. She pulled something from the duffel bag and threw it at me, and I managed to catch it by dropping my ax. It was a large plastic bottle only slightly smaller than my head.

"Protein Powder?" I asked, looking back at Tessa at reading the worn label. "What's this for?"

"It's supposed to be good people putting on muscle, and it should be fortified," She explained. "A container like that is enough for someone to live off of, as long as they are varying their diet a bit. But a scoop or two with some water should keep you from eating everything we bring in."

"And it's still good after all this time?" I asked, turning the bottle over in my hands.



“Yeah, I checked. It smells fine and it's got the DMAS label on the back.”

I looked around at the bottle's label and sure enough, there was a tag that contained DMAS, just like there was on all of the canned food we had been eating.

“Well, that's good, I'd feel bad for eating everything we find,” I commented, unscrewing the top to find it was still sealed save a small divot, where I assumed Tessa had smelled the contents.

I helped Tessa get everything inside and sorted, adding a few cans of food to the stockpile and another duffel full of stuff to trade. Not long after we were done Tessa brought up the serum.

“So... how are you feeling?”

“Good, the legs healing good and I should be able to come out with you soon,” I said, intentionally playing dumb. “I'm tempted to try and go with you tomorrow, but I think it would be better to take another day.”

“That's not what I meant you ass, I meant your strength!” She shot back, shaking her head.

Instead of answering I only looked back at her with a confused look, which she responded to by picking up her canteen and throwing it at me. I couldn't help but chuckle when I caught it.

“I feel stronger, but it's not anything massively game-changing,” I explained, still smiling. “It's great, and I would definitely say next opportunity you should take one, but if we are looking to give me a noticeable advantage rather than a small boost...”

“Right, okay, that makes sense,” She agreed with a frown. “Do you think the second injection will be as bad as the first one?”

“God I hope not,” I answered, grabbing the serum injector from one of the shelves. “Is there anything you want to do before I do this? This took a lot out of me and even if the second one isn't as bad, chances are I'm still going to be useless.”

When she couldn't think of anything I nodded and started to set up my bed. Last time I had fallen out of the chair almost immediately, so this time wanted to start on the ground. Trying my best not to clench or anything I quickly injected my leg with the second serum and waited for the sensations and pain to roll in.

It took a bit longer, but the pain and chill did spread throughout my body, spreading from the injection points until it was all I could feel. Luckily, while the pattern continued to be the same

as the first time, the pain and aching definitely seemed to be scaled back. Still, when it reached my spine I still couldn't help but arch my back and shout out in pain, before passing out.

When I came to Tessa was kneeling by me again, looking less worried but still clearly watching over me.

"How long?"

"No more than a few seconds," She answered easily, turning to one of the shelves and pulling off a large plastic glass.

"That's good, seemed less intense than before. Still sucked though," I said, slowly sitting up.

My muscles were twitching and convulsing slightly, little tremors that made it hard to control myself fully. I managed to move back and lean against the far end of the APC. I watched as Tessa cracked open the container of protein powder and used a spoon that was inside the bottle to put two scoops into the plastic glass, filling it with water and using a spoon to mix it up. She handed the glass to me.

"Drink up, I'll get some normal food ready," She said, grabbing a can opener. "Hopefully that takes the edge off. It's supposed to be chocolate by the way."

I drank the mixture hesitantly, before finishing it off quickly. It wasn't bad, and it was vaguely chocolate flavored, but I would never call it good. I did end up having a second one though, which tasted the same. When we ate, I only had the same amount as Tessa, which was a solid improvement.

"We should definitely add this stuff to the priority list," I said when I finished my can of vegetables. "Especially if we are going to start having more and more serums."

"They are also helpful for winter if you're still around by then," Tessa said, laying back in her bed with a huff.

"How long until winter?"

"Eight or nine months."

"I don't think so then, I'm heading back in six months," I answered. "Assuming I survive that long."

"Considering we will be spending a lot of that time together, I hope you do," She responded with a scoff.

We chatted for a little while longer before eventually Tessa pulled out a worn book, and I remade my bed. I hadn't intended to sleep, but by then the dull ache from the strength serum had almost faded, as did the ache in my leg. All that was left was the exhaustion and fatigue from the second serum and the workout from cutting down the firewood. I fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning I woke up hungry but feeling good. The lightness and ease of movement I had barely noticed the day before was even stronger now, easily noticeable. My leg also felt and looked better, with the swelling almost completely fading and the wounds healing nicely. As long as I kept it slow, it would be fine to do some light scaving soon.

Tessa was already gone from the APC when I woke up, but when I pushed open the hatch I heard her moving around outside.

"Stay inside the APC please," She said sternly. "I'm showering and if you try and take a peak I will shoot you."

Not doubting her claim for a second I quickly shut the hatch and went back inside, eating my breakfast and two protein shakes, before waiting for her to give me the all-clear, which she did a few minutes later by thumping on the side of the APC. When I climbed out she was hanging her wet clothes from a tree.

"There is still water in the shower, I suggest you clean up," She suggested when she was done, and she started getting ready to leave. "There are some clothes that should fit you in the green duffel so you can wash those too."

With that she headed out, leaving me alone once again. Instead of taking a shower immediately, I went through the same routine I had before, testing my strength in a number of ways.

The difference was even more noticeable before. Push-ups and sit-ups, while still requiring effort, were easy, as were the pull-ups. In fact, I could even do a pull-up one-handed. It was hard to exactly judge how much stronger I was especially in a broad sense, but it was definitely a large improvement from my base levels of strength.

The ax felt incredibly light, enough so that I started to get worried that I would break it while I was cutting down another tree. I also dragged that tree back to camp without even struggling. I couldn't help but smile as I realized that this would be an incredible advantage when picking up new crates and facing the various threats waiting for me.

I spent a few hours making firewood, turning three whole trees into split wood, and adding to the existing pile along the back end of the APC. When I felt like I had contributed enough I finally showered and washed my clothes.

Taking a shower, even a barely lukewarm one with limited water and a cudged-together control method, felt absolutely amazing. With the stress of the last few days, I hadn't realized how dirty I felt until it was all washing off of me. I resolved to figure out a way to have these more often, even if I had to get the water myself.

When I felt clean and had changed into the salvaged clothes, something that made me pause for a second as I had literally no idea how actually clean they were, I pulled myself back on top of the APC to wait for Tessa to get back. I had her pistol sitting next to me on the worn and slightly rusty roof of the armored vehicle, scanning the woods for anything dangerous or interesting.

Just when I was to get seriously bored I heard a solid knocking sound coming from a good distance away, directly in front of me. It was out of visual range, the source hidden by the trees and underbrush. I leaned over and grabbed my ax, but stayed where I was, scanning the area. After a few seconds, I heard the knocking again, this time even closer.

I cursed under my breath, my heart rate picking up. I gripped the ax tightly, wondering what was making that noise and debating if I should just climb inside and seal myself in. Before I could decide it was too late, I could hear the sound of crunching leaves and footsteps. A middle-aged man, dressed in leather armor and cargo shorts came into view through the underbrush. He continued to get closer until he spotted me, which is when he froze, his hand sliding down to his hip where he had some sort of firearm holstered.

He was carrying a massive pack on his back and had a well-made, metal-tipped spear in his hand.

"Who the fuck are you?" He asked, scowling at me, his hand wrapping around the grip of his pistol. "Where the fuck is Tessa?"

"Uh hi, you must be John," I responded. "My name is Leon. I've been working with Tessa the past few days..."

He stared at me, eyes not leaving me for a second. I slowly raised my hand away from Tessa's pistol to show I wasn't going to shoot at him.

"Uh... Tessa is going to be back in... well any time now... She said... you'd better have brought some of your grandmothers... Pickles? No, wait, pickled beets!"

I fumbled for a second, trying to remember what she had said I should tell him. For a long few seconds, he didn't react, before pulling his hand off his gun.

"Well that's good enough not to shoot you, but I'm going to wait nearby and out of sight for her to get back. Tell her to whistle when she does."

Before I could say anything he took a dozen or so steps back before breaking my line of sight behind a massive tree, lugging his massive pack back into the trees and underbrush. After a few seconds of silence, I let out a long, tense breath.

“That could have gone worse,” I mumbled to myself, before cracking open the hatch and crawling back inside.