

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 past, 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, before I took a step towards 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 building, 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 down our current road another sixty to seventy feet before a road led in the right direction. 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 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, nodding towards the doorway into the building.

A quick look around and 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."

"That exists 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 utterly 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. “Its Ilbryen and his people, this is them challenging 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 up to this point it had been completely silent, and that the cone of light it was projecting barely stretched out a few yards.

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 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 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. “Get in here Leon.”

“What?”

“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, colliding it back up and slowly recovering 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 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

We made good progress for the next few hours, despite having wasted a chunk of our morning on the dark warehouse. We were about fifteen minutes away when Tessa let out a long sigh.

"Sorry, for snapping at you," Tessa said.

"It's fine. I'm used to expecting that kind of crap from nobles. I'm honestly surprised it took them that long to do something like that," I admitted. "There are a lot of stories about what some of the... morally loose nobles can do when they get vindictive."

“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.”

“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, Tessa stopping after a few steps and looking 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.

“Right. So you go out, buy paints and then paint it. The next day you come back and find the paint had 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, they don't care enough to do anything.”

“Fine, then I paint it and hide it, so they can't wash it off.”

“The next day a perfect replica, in the original color, 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.”

“Where are you going with this Leon?” She asked. “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 want it, they will win that fight. They have several times before,” I explained. “They are holding all of the cards and the deck is stacked. They are cheating, have an ace up their sleeve and they bribed the dealer, bought the casino and copyrighted the game. 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?”

She slowed down for a moment as I ranted, nodding when I mentioned Olivia.

“Nobles can fix basically everything, they easily fixed her once I signed my contract. But those kinds of treatment 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.”

“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 comes.

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. As the sun was starting to sink lower we debated stopping for the day. The first cache, the first along the general path we were following at least, was only a thirty minute walk away, but Tessa wanted to play it safe.

“Even with us going to Bakersfield, *and* wasting our morning with that stupid warehouse, we are making good time,” She 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 looking for a place to hunker down for the night. Eventually, while exploring a ransacked restaurant, we discovered that the freezer was completely cleaned out, meaning what should have been a rotted mess of mold was actually a relatively clean space with a very heavy duty door.

After spending ten minutes yanking the mostly intact cushions out of some booths in the restaurant's dining area, we even had a comfortable place to sleep. When everything was set up 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, it's like it's been scientifically designed to be delicious and still somehow be healthy," I explained. "I didn't get a chance to go before coming here, but..."

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 before Tessa managed to find her lighter, which she flicked open and flicked it on. The blue and purple loop of plasma cast an eerie light over both of us. We rushed around for a minute getting everything set up with the extremely low 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 nodded and 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 enough 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 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 my family.”

“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 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.

Another fifteen minutes of walking and 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 small depressions, no wider than the length of my axe. 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,” explained. “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, swooping down to land on the field. Both of us ducked low instinctually, only to slowly stand as the bird landed and began to move around the open area. After a few seconds the ground seemed to explode, the mutant bird disappearing in a shower of dirt, rocks and chunks of fake grass. There was no sound, 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.

“I figured out what the gaps 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 this side of the field. 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 for 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.”

“But didn’t come through because it stopped,” 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, first thing we need to figure out is how fast it can move,” Tesa 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 wider.

“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. Mutants kill humans for no reason, even when they aren't hungry. But whatever it 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, ignoring 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 a foot into the. I jumped and grabbed the pole, my flash bang gloves gripping it tightly as I threw my weight into it once, twice, three times, managing to get it three feet 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 the mutant go back under ground, 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 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. A gentle rumbles, barely noticeable before 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 through, its three part beak face opening up and quivering. The pole was buried into it, disappearing from view into its three sides jaws.

“We need to kill it before it goes back down!” I shouted, grabbing my ax 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 head slapping 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 it's armored head. I released my ax and raise 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 backwards 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 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, the metal bar slamming into her bicep 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 it's 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 third of the way down the field.

But I did hold on, managing to wing 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 laid there, waiting for my head to stop spinning and the world to stay still, before slowly getting my feet under me 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 form, 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 the patch of trees I gently laid my partner down, before 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 crabbed 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 thats 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, trying to remember what to do. "We need two straight sticks and... something to secure my arm...Fuck I can barely thing 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 her way through the process of setting her arm, before finally I took her arm in my hand.

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

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. “I wasn't tensing up!”

“Oh... gotcha. Sorry.”

“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 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.

I led her back to the parking lot, where we had been studying the turf field from 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 ax 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 mutants 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 back track 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 on 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, but 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 room that was mostly an empty room, save for a few shovels and outdoor gardening equipment.

When I was sure nothing was hiding inside one of the rooms I went back outside and retrieved Tessa, who followed me inside, managing to move under her own power and stay upright, save a half 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?”

As I responded I started blocking the door by dragging a large, heavy duty metal cabinet in front of it and tipping it over long ways. When it was pressed up against the door I started jamming the heaviest stuff in the room on top of it to even better secure it.

“The description for the healing serum said broken bones healed in about a week and a half, plus or minus a few days,” I 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 properly 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.”

“That's fair. I would rather not waste both of our ammo, but I could definitely shoot with my right hand,” She admitted.

“You can use my pistol, I have more ammo than you do,” I offered, getting a single appreciative nod.

“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 reloading with one hand, or doing anything one handed *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 scaving, otherwise 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 of examining it 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 clearly 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 there were a thousand and one things going on there,” 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 counter argument. “I was shooting a bow for fuck sake, I should have never gotten close enough to hit in the first place.”

“You were aiming for a tiny spot between its armored plates,” I continued.

“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 and that left you open,” I explained.

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, and Tessa was already on watch. She had occupied her time by building a better splint for herself 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 at 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 easily made it 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 traveled and as 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 safehouse 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 to areas that normal delivery services refuse to go, or people who need less than legal things delivered can be dangerous,” 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 ask, looking at me with wide eyes. “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. Lucky we were in a relatively untouched neighborhood, the dilapidated and overgrown houses seemingly untouched by 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 than 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 amounts 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 it 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 next morning 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 invested with a nest of mutated rats the size of a big loaf of bread. Each one had massive buck teeth and would screech when they were 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 bit 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 later twenty scav rats later and 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 which 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 first watch.