

Chapter 16

We had been traveling for a day and a half, making up for some of our lost time, when Tessa had a random question.

“So... who exactly is watching us?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “People from my world.”

“Yeah... but are they watching through the TV?” She asked. “I know sports and stuff would come through the TV live, so are we on TV all the time?”

“Not... Really?” I answered, trying to think of how to clarify it, despite the fact that she wouldn't have a frame of reference for a lot of the specifics. “So, do you know what the internet is?”

“I've heard it was like the radio but with everyone talking at once,” She said. “Just kind of sounds chaotic to me.”

“It was a lot more organized than that. Imagine TV, but not only could you watch stuff, you could access a lot of information, and even post your own information, like share images or message people. Anyway, it's completely replaced TV, we just call it media now”

“Okay... And that's where people are watching us?”

“Yeah.”

We were silent for a while, crossing through a massive pile up on a long stretch of road. It was tense being between towns like this, but according to the map we would reach another group of buildings before it got too late.

“How many people do you think are watching us?”

“Probably a good amount,” I guessed, stopping to look into the woods before jogging to catch up. “The fact that they invited you and went through the expense of setting up all the shit we are about to go through, they must be making some money off of us.”

“So... like a couple thousand?”

“Thousand?” I asked, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. “No, probably a lot more than that. Tens of thousands at least. Maybe even a few hundred thousand.”

"That's... a lot of people," Tessa said after a long lull in the conversation. "I can't even imagine a thousand..."

"Earth's population is ten billion, then there are three billion living in the lunar cities," I explained, Tessa turning to look at me with wide eyes. "I think Mars was getting close to seven hundred and fifty thousand last I heard."

"That's insane!" Tessa responded in shock, stopping to turn and stare at me openly. "How? That's... can't...that many people..."

"Probably. For all I know they are running this a loss to earn the ins and outs about how to set this all up," I guessed with a shrug. "I mean some of the challenges around caches are easy, and other times they are way too difficult. I just hope they listen to my advice when we get back."

"... like what?" She asked after a long, long pause. "Sorry, I'm still wrapping my mind around *billions*. I... don't really know how much that is. I know it's next after a million... but past that?"

"Yeah, to be fair I don't have a whole lot of context for a billion past the population," I admitted," I admitted with a shrug.

We were quiet for a while, Tessa wrestling with a number that her planet hadn't seen in a long time. Eventually she must have been satisfied or given up/

"What are you gonna tell them when you get back?" She asked as we climbed up and over an overturned truck trailer.

"Well... I should probably keep them to myself for now," I said. "Probably not something to talk about when we are being watched."

"Huh... was gonna share mine but you're probably right, wouldn't want to ruin the surprises."

I chuckled and we continued walking, continuing to make headway on the long, car stuffed roadway. I tried very hard not to think about how horrible it must have been to be stuck in a jam like this, knowing behind you was probably a death sentence.

After about another fifteen minutes of walking Tessa slowed down, stopping as she walks sideways between two cars that had stopped to close together. She concentrated for a moment, looking around in confusion.

"What's going-"

“Ssshhh!” She said, still looking around, slowly pulling out her sword, clicking it active, the blade extending from the handle. “I can hear something.”

I pulled out my hatchet, activating it quickly into its full axe form, looking around as well. Sure enough as I focused I could hear a slight humming sound, but it was far too subtle for me to figure out where it was coming from.

“I hear it,” I said. “Where is it coming from?”

“I don’t know, but... it kinda sounds like your drone,” She responded.

Before I could say anything a familiar sound cracked over us, the sound of a zap round whizzing over us, slapping into one of the cars between Tessa and I.

“Get down!” I called out, diving between two cars, watching Tessa do the same.

A dozen zap rounds passed through where both of us had just been standing, sending sparks and putting dents in whatever cars they hit past us. The barrage continued, as if they were trying to find a gap in our cover. After five seconds a quartet of combat drones flew past, one of them dropping a canister between the both of us.

“Fuck!” I said, jumping and crawling to the canister, slapping it under one of the rusted out wrecks that Tessa was hiding next to.

The flashbang had just disappeared under the wreck when it went off, sending out a ridiculously bright flash and a massive bang. However, the wreck blocked the majority from us, meaning we both just felt a minor ringing in our ears.

“What the hell are those?!” Tessa asked as we crawled away from the truck, which was smoking enough that I assumed something had caught fire from the flashbang.

“Drones!” I shouted back over the continued shooting. “First of the enhanced challenges!”

Tessa let out a long grumbling curse, aimed at whoever came up with this idea. Eventually our crawling led us to an overturned truck, both of us leaning back against exposed underworkings.

“Same plan as before!” I called out, putting my hand over Tessa’s mouth to keep her from commenting. “They can hear and adapt! You know what I mean?”

She nodded, chewing her lip and unclipped her bow while I shrugged off my pack. Somewhere along the way we had transferred most of the stuff we had left to my pack. Since I

was the strong tank it made sense to keep Tessa free to move around, plus her pack got in the way of her new quiver.

After a moment of preparation we shared a nod, and I jumped out of cover, carrying my axe in one hand and my pistol in the other. I shot once, managing to just barely wing the lead drone, catching all of their attention at once. I turned and ran, making sure that they could still me as I juke in between cars, just barely avoiding the zap rounds they were unloading at me. I was nowhere near as fast as Tessa, but my enhanced strength let me do a long bounding stride that definitely pushed to the upper limits of human speed.

I cursed as a zap round bounced off my shield, my one and only defense taken down. It would be staying down too, as stopping something like a zap round, even if it was meant to be “non-lethal” would keep it down for a while. I slide down lower behind a car, the drones zipping over me, flinging themselves into a sharp turn to face me again. I cursed and looked around, holstering my pistol before reaching out and grabbing a rusted and hanging car door, grunting as I yanked it off of the car.

“Fuck fuck fuck please don’t go through,” I said as I held my impromptu shield up, crouching slightly behind it, feeling a tingle of electricity as a few dozen zap rounds slammed into it, but failed to go through. “Yes!”

I held the shield up again, making sure to keep it between me and the drones. Suddenly one of them lurched, bobbed slightly before it fell from the sky, slamming into the windshield of a large van, imbedded in the previously intact safety glass. Sparks flew out from a singular hold, highlighting the arrow sticking out of the side. I looked down the road to see Tessa standing on the side of the rolled over truck, the door open beside her. Immediately the drones whirled around, which pulled the attention off me but meant Tessa was now in danger.

The drones opened fire on the skilled archer, who had clearly seen the danger coming, because she jumped down into the wrecked truck disappearing into the cab. The drones didn’t slow down, buzzing the vehicle packed road as they peppered the bottom of the truck cab, sparks flying everywhere. I cursed, hoping that the truck bottom was enough to keep Tessa safe, and ran after them, sliding to a stop when they flew up, higher into the sky, before diving back down on me, peppering the car door with the special ammunition. I cursed and held up the car door, gritting my teeth as I weathered the barrage.

Suddenly I heard the familiar whipping sound of Tessa firing an arrow, and I looked up through the empty window space to see one of the drones falling out of the sky towards me, the rest of them following it down. I dropped my shield and dove out of the way, the relatively large drone smashing into the ground just about where I had been standing. The remaining two drones got down just as low, probably trying to avoid Tessa by getting as low as possible. Unfortunately for them, I could be just as deadly.

I jumped up onto a car hood, before jumping again and swinging my axe downward, flinging myself surprisingly high with my enhanced strength. I slammed my new shiny axe deep into one of the drones, its active lights immediately going dark as we both fell back to the ground. I hit the ground and rolled, not exactly gracefully, but I managed to avoid hurting myself. Unfortunately I could feel how sloppy it was, and how open I was for the last remaining drone to attack. I tried to dive out of the way again, scrambling to hide behind a nearby van. To my surprise I made it, the drone not firing at me once. I frowned, expecting to have been hit at least a few times. Instead, everything was silent.

My frown increasing I slowly peaked up around the vans hood, my eyes going wide as I realized that the last drone was down as well, an arrows sticking out from its forward sensors. Tessa had managed to shoot it while it was focused on me, and I had missed the sound of it hitting the ground in the confusion. I stood slowly from my spot, looking up and around to see if any more drones were on their way.

“You good?” Tessa called out as she made her to the downed drone nearest to her, climbing up to retrieve her arrow.

“Yeah, nothing hit me,” I responded, double checking myself to be sure. “Yeah, I’m good. You alright?”

“They never got close,” She assured me, finally managing to yank her arrow free from the drone. “So... what the hell was that?”

“Like I said, it's the first enhanced challenge,” I said, looking down at the drone I had taken down, crouching to get a better look. “I recognized these drones from home, and they were firing Zap rounds. Basic ‘non-lethal’ stuff that cops shoot at you.”

“That sounded like sarcasm,” She commented, making her way to the second drone she took down.

“That's because it was. The bullets are designed to break apart and deliver a electric shock, taking down the target, but they are still bullets,” I said, shaking my head. “You get hit anywhere important and you are very much dead. Considering how strong the shock is, anywhere near the chest will stop the heart.”

“Is this what you got shot with?” She asked, yanking her arrow free and clipping it to the side of her bow.

“... Forgot I told you about that...” I admitted. “I hope my mom isn’t watching, I told her I pulled a muscle.”

“You passed off a bullet wound as a pulled muscle?”

“She had too much on her plate to worry about as it was,” I explained, shaking my head. “Didn’t need to add anything to it.”

“Right... well, still kind of stupid, in a touching kind of way,” She responded, standing beside me. “So.. what’s up? Wait, is there a cache nearby?”

I frowned and opened my map, shaking my head and closing it again.

“No... looks like they expect us to do these for free.”

“Right... still think we shouldn’t have skipped around as many as we could?” She asked with a “I told you so” look on her face, her arms crossed. “C’mon, if there aren’t any rewards here, we need to keep moving.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Chapter 17

We traveled on through the rest of the day, leaving the drone wrecks behind us as we pushed onwards. Eventually, as the sun started to set we started looking for a place to take shelter. We knew that once we had started on this particular long roadway that there was no way we would be able to make it in one day. With this in mind, as it started getting later we started looking for intact vehicles.

The plan was for us to find a car or truck and find a way to seal ourselves inside as best we could. The likelihood of something big stumbling on us was small, especially because we were traveling at a decent pace, so as long as we had enough protection to keep from being spotted by screamers, we would hopefully be fine. At minimum, a lot of the car trunks were mostly intact. Sleeping in such a tight, claustrophobic space would suck, but it would work.

As it got later and later, we both finally conceded that the night would be miserable, and we started looking for vehicles with large trunks. Eventually we managed to find a truck with a large cap over the bed. It only took us a few minutes to open it up and push out everything inside, both of us doing our best to ignore that we were essentially dumping a family’s most important possessions, including three boxes of family photo albums, out onto the ground.

On the plus side there was a case of still intact water bottles and a box of assorted canned food tucked into the back. When the truck bed and cap was completely cleared out we had a decent sized space to sleep in, as well as a bunch of clothes and a blanket to act as a cushion and pillow. We quickly ate dinner, eating a few of the cans we found while clearing everything out.

The next morning we headed back out, trying to make as much progress as possible. By the halfway point of the day we had made it onto the general “path” that would eventually lead us to the golden point on the map. We spent the rest of the day making as much progress on that path as possible, looking for another place to sleep as it started to get late.

After a few hours of looking for any intact vehicle, both of us hoping for another, both of us were getting nervous, wondering if we would end up having to bite the bullet and stay in a car trunk.

Thankfully, though, about thirty minutes before we would have had to make a choice, we finally made it to one of the landmarks we were judging our progress on, a large bridge that crossed a wide river. On top of the reassurance that we were making a good headway, about a two-hundred meters before the bridge were the remains of a military checkpoint of some kind. It was definitely set up from movable materials, with rotted sandbags and metal constructs serving as a defensible position. Concrete barriers were set up to block the entire road save one lane, going out to the bridge.

Past the checkpoint was the remains of small building even more barriers and...

“You’ve got to be shitting me...” Tessa said. “What are the chances?”

“Well... considering it was a military vehicle... pretty good?’ I guessed, smirking as Tessa climbed over one of the rotted sandbag structures, making a beeline through the checkpoint.

On the other side, parked at an angle with its front facing us, was an APC, just like the one we had been living in for the last few months. Its front end was marked with soot, as if it had been lit on fire, and it had *definitely* been stripped, but as we got closer we could see that it was still in pretty good shape.

“It’s got less rust than the old one,” I pointed out as Tessa climbed up to the roof, grabbing the handle for the hatch.

She tried to open it, grunting and straining, unable to move the latch system. When it refused to budge she pulled out her safety knife and prepared to just solve the problem permanently.

“Woah, hold on!” I called out. “Let me try first will you? You can try cutting it if I can’t do it.”

“Oh... right,” She said, standing up and stepping back. “Yeah, give it a shot.”

I climbed up on top of the APC and took her place, putting one hand on the handle and the other on a nearby grab bar for leverage. With a grunt I pulled, slowly increasing how hard

until I was definitely past what a normal human could achieve, into the range of professional body builder or olympic lifter. For a moment I didn't think it would budge, before a scraping grinding sound came from the mechanism and whatever had seized it gave out, the handle snapping open.

I opened the hatch, tentatively sticking my head into the long broken down vehicle, wary of anything dangerous inside. It was in surprisingly good condition, no doubt because it was sealed up so well inside the armor. I pulled my head out and worked the locking mechanism for a minute, making sure that we wouldn't get locked inside before hopping down inside, Tessa following right after me.

The interior was much more cramped than the old APC had been, as while that one had been stripped for parts long ago, there were still a lot of chairs, frames and more inside. Still, there was plenty of room for us to sleep, especially if one of us sat in the driver's seat, which looked relatively comfortable. It was a very different feel compared to the old APC, but I couldn't deny having so much armor between me and the wildlife and mutants outside was comforting.

"I call the driver's seat," Tessa said, already climbing in to sit down. "I almost kept the one back home 'cause it was so comfortable."

We made ourselves at home, enjoying a cold dinner before settling in to sleep through the night. Despite the fact that I was sleeping on the cold metal floor, I slept like a baby. The next morning we woke up and reluctantly exited the armored vehicle. It was obvious that both of us wanted to make excuses to stay, as finding such a safe place was clearly rare outside of a walled off town, but neither of us mentioned it.

The temptation to go back got even harder to ignore when we crossed the last two hundred meters to the bridge and got our first good look at it when it wasn't mostly blocked by trees and rusted out vehicles.

The entire bridge had been heavily modified, and judging from the sign that said "Good Luck! ~ Illbryen" it had been done in preparation for us.

"I don't want to say I told you so... but I told you so," Tessa said, shaking her head. "If we had skipped a little we could have avoided this."

"No, we wouldn't have," I disagreed. "The map says this is the only standing bridge for miles. Which was probably intentional."

There were to major modifications to the bridge, each more unbelievable than the next. The road all the way from our side to the other had been completely removed, giving us a clear view out into the water. The frame of the bridge, which was a series of tessellating triangles along each side, capped by connecting supports, was made almost completely of large metal I-beams riveted together. The frame was completely intact, if a little rusty, and had been clearly

reinforced recently. Between each side of the heavy metal frame was an array of platforms, ropes, wires, moving and spinning surfaces and more than a few dangerous looking traps. There was a single platform still connected to the road, that lead from our side to the first platform, clearly were we were supposed to start from.

They had turned the bridge into a giant obstacle course.

Of course it wasn't a normal one, either. As we looked I started to notice some rather lethal looking additions. The rope swings between a few platforms threw off sparks of electricity from where they were hung as they swung in the breeze. Several platforms shifted from safe to what looked like a roughly spiked surface every few seconds, while other platforms swung down until they were vertical. One of the obstacles was a spinning blade, definitely going fast enough to hurt us if we didn't jump between the platforms it was spinning over at the right time. One of the most obvious ones was a series of massive axes swing back and forth.

It looked like a comical interpretation of a bad, campy villain's trapped lair.

"Maybe... we could swim across?" I asked, both of us stepping closer to the edge, looking down over at the water below.

I couldn't help but wince at how fast and rough the water was moving down the river. Obvious currents ran under the water, occasionally displacing visibly in certain spots, churning the surface. It looked dangerous even if I was wearing nothing but a swimsuit and the water wasn't probably filled with dangerous mutants. But between the very real chance something lethal lurked under the churning surface, and the large amount of equipment we were both carrying...

"I don't think that's an option," Tessa said, shaking her head. "While falling into the water looks like the least dangerous option for failure... I don't think that makes it any less dangerous."

I looked back down into the water, shivering when I recalled the slime monster that had almost caught us in the small park pond. There was no way these waters were empty, and I didn't like the odds of me fighting a sea monster.

"But... what about over it?" She asked, getting my attention and pointing to the metal structure that supported the bridge. "Looks big enough to climb on"

While the road had been removed the main structure of the bridge was intact, even visibly reinforced. The metal structure started six or even feet past where the bridge would have started, going up in a sharp incline leveling out flat, dropping back down on the other side. The metal beam that made up the structure was just wide enough that it was feasible to cross walking on top of it.

Tessa walked along the edge of where the road now dropped off, heading towards the metal structure of the bridge and away from the starting platform. She reached walked to where the supports reached the ground, examining it for a second before reaching out to a handhold, looking to start climbing.

There was a muffled zapping sound and she jerked back, cursing and scowling at where she had touched. Before she could explain what happened, not that I needed it spelled out, a loud klaxon alarm went off, making both of us jump. I had my hand on my axe immediately, while Tessa went for her pistol, the weapon almost drawn before we both realized nothing additional was happening.

“What's the likelihood that if we do that enough something bad is going to happen?” Tessa asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“I'm gonna guess pretty high,” I responded, turning back to the starting platform, climbing my way up and walking to the edge. “C'mon, this should be easy for you, I'm the one who is going to struggle.”

“And that somehow makes it better?” She asked, walking back to the platform once she stepped up, a buzzer sounded, and from under the platform a box slowly up, labeled “Extra storage. Accessible from either side.”

“Well... at least I won't have to lug this around,” I said, shrugging off my backpack and dropping it in the box, Tessa hesitantly putting her bow and quiver in as well.

Once we had finished taking off any unnecessary weight the box flew away, stopping at the halfway point above the bridge, probably waiting for one of us to call it back or reach the other side and call it there. After watching it zip away, the bottom glowing with the tell tale sign of mass reducers and hover tech, I turned to Tessa.

“Alright, I'm gonna go first in case there's some sort of trick, then-”

Before I could finish my plan, Tessa took two big steps back, ran and jumped across the first gap, landing easily on the second platform before turning back at me, smirking with her hand on her hip.

“You said it yourself, this is going to be much easier for me,” She said. “I go first and help if you stumble. Now come on, don't want our audience to think you can't keep up, do you?”

I cursed and shook my head, taking a few extra steps back, before running to the edge and jumping, holding my breath as I passed over the gap and landed on the platform.

“Great, now just the rest of it to go,” Tessa joked, vaguely gesturing to the arrayed death trap in front of us. “Try and keep up!”

Chapter 18

From the first platform there were a series of jumps staggered on seemingly ordinary platforms. If I had to guess, it was kept simple on purpose to ease us into the harrowing and ridiculously insane challenge. Tessa jumped from one to the other, making the last three without even stopping. I stopped for everyone, gauging distance and making sure I had a solid footing.

“This is the dumbest thing I think I have ever done,” I said, shaking my head after I landed on the last simple platform.

“...It does seem a bit out there, even after the darkened warehouse,” Tessa agreed, have waited for me before the next stage. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, let’s just get this over with.”

She nodded and we both turned to face the next step, which was a series of slightly smaller platforms that were slightly farther apart... that collapsed, one after the other. We would have to jump as fast as we could to keep ahead of the collapse, meaning no time to prepare or judge distancing.”

“One at a time?” Tessa asked, and I nodded. “Alright, see you on the other side.”

She stepped back as far as she could, waiting for the first two platforms to reset. The second she had two platforms up, she ran and jumped, easily clearing the three foot gap. After the first three jumps she slowed down, not because she was tired or anything, but because she had caught up with the platform rests and had to slow down until it was ready. It visibly threw off her groove, but she quickly recovered and finished quickly, not even short of breath.

“Leon!” She called back, hands to her mouth. “Jump the second the first platform is ready, it will give you time to prepare!”

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up, stepping back and preparing myself. When the first platform started to rise, I tensed, waiting for it to lock into place before running and leaping across the gap. I did my best not to look down, focusing on the next platform. Even with Tessa’s trick, I didn’t have much time to prepare, not if I wanted any sort of buffer between me and the collapsing platforms behind me. In the end I was very glad I had that buffer as well, as when I was about to leap from the third last to the second to last, I misstepped. Luckily I had time to line up again, but it was still a heart pounding experience.

The in-between platform for the next section was wide enough for us to stand on it together, but not much more. Thankfully the next stage wouldn't require us to jump between platforms. Unfortunately, it was also the first introduction to a dangerous trap element, a series of dangerous looking pendulums with comically large axe heads on them, swinging back and forth. There were only six of them, but the path through them doubled back across their range, forcing us to go through them multiple times. They swung much too low to go under, and would absolutely kill me if I took one head on, at least if my shield was down.

"Fuck me... Okay, I'm going first this time," I said, stepping forward, just short of the dangerous part of the path. "I can tank one of their hits at least."

Tessa didn't argue, and I watched the ax shaped obstacle swing back and forth, looking for the perfect time. Once I started I would be hard pressed to stop, as there was clearly less and less room between each axe. This would mean coming back would get easier, but that I would have to go through it getting more and more difficult as I went twice.

With a muttered curse I ran forward, making it through the first two axes easily, stopping to let the third swing past, the breeze tugging at my jacket. The second it was past I dove past it, jumping and stopping again to dodge the last axe, stepping on the other side with a long string of curses. On the turn I had some space to breathe and recover, walking back around to the axes. I waited a solid two minutes, working up my nerve. Thankfully Tessa didn't comment on how long it took me to work up the nerve.

I threw myself as hard as I could, managing to jump through three paces with one hard leap, dodging three swinging blades. I only had to wait a split second to jump past the fourth and fifth blades, but almost got clipped by the last as I jumped the gun. I could hear Tessa cursing to herself.

"You okay?" She asked, close enough now to not need to shout.

"Yeah, it missed," I responded. "Barely."

She silently nodded and I stopped to take another moment, watching the blades go back and forth, trying to feel their timing rather than have to actually count it out. After another minute I jumped forward, sliding to a stop and letting the third axe pass, stepping forward and letting the fourth go as well. I managed to move forward before the third clipped me, but the timing was off, the fifth axe was going to far in its swing, but the fourth would no doubt hit me before it would be perfect. I shouted a curse and risked it, lunging forward between them, somehow making it through both of them. Unfortunately I hadn't timed the six axe properly, and as I passed that it clipped me in the shoulder, slamming into the protective barrier of my purple level chest armor. The red shield lit up and broke, but it was enough for my momentum to carry me through and out of danger. I stumbled and fell, rolling to a stop just before sliding off the finish platform.

"LEON!" Tessa shouted, a scream of horror and fear.

"I'm alright!" I shouted back, sitting up despite my sore arm and shoulder. "I'm okay!"

I looked back to see Tessa holding her head in her hands. For a moment she was silent before standing up straight and looking at me.

"Are you sure?" She asked, her voice warbling just the slightest.

"Yeah, the barrier saved me," I assured her. "My shoulder is gonna be bruised but I'm fine."

"Alright... just sit tight, I'm coming through," She said, getting ready to rush forward.

"Hey! Hold on a second!" I shouted back. "Just sit down for a second and think. Calm down before trying it, alright?"

"I'm fine," She said, focused on the path.

"But... But I'm not!" I said. "I need a minute to calm down before watching you, so give me a minute to recover, alright?"

She stopped and opened her mouth to shout back, but snapped it shut and closed her eyes. After a moment she nodded and sat down. I sighed and laid back down on the larger platform, ignoring the sounds of the axes swinging back and forth. Truth was, I was worried about her. I had a chance to survive a hit, as I had just shown, but for Tessa, a hit would almost definitely cut into her deep. Between the most likely grievous blow and the water beneath, there was very little chance she would survive, to say nothing about how she would continue if she somehow managed to get hit but still reach me.

About five minutes went by before I heard Tessa taking a deep breath. I looked up, just in time to watch her dash through paths of the first four axes, stopping to let the fifth swing by, before diving across the remaining distance. She rolled once and popped back to her feet, confidently making her way to the first double back, and after only pausing for a few moments, made it through that as well. She took a bit longer to make her way through the last bend, but finished with an easy dive past the sixth swinging axe, coming to a stop right beside me.

"Damn... You're gonna make me look bad," I said, as she stood, holding out her hand to help me up.

"You were definitely right, this really plays to the serums I took. The reflex and speed together-"

"Don't jinx it just yet," I said, cutting her off before she could say something we regretted. "We are only like two fifths across, we have a bit more to go."

She groaned and nodded, ahead to what came next. Neither of us had really been paying attention, between wanting to focus on the challenge at hand and the criss-crossing nature of some of the sections making it hard to tell what was where. However, now that it was here, it was obvious that the rope swinging was next, and I was even more nervous about it than I had been originally. There were seven rope swings in a row, the first two separated by their own platforms. The next one had two ropes in a row before there was a platform to land on, while the finally group had three. Even worse was that every several seconds a low hum spread through the area, accompanied by zapping and crackling coming from where each rope connected a beam above us.

“Right... so swinging across without kletting the rope taze the fuck out of us,” Tessa said, shaking her head. “If it's arcing and zapping like that its going to be a lot, probably enough to go through our gloves and definitely enough to fuck up our swing.”

“My shield won't help with it either,” I added, getting a confused look. “The rope would already be in contact with me, the shield won't do anything for that.”

“What about your gloves?” She asked. “They are stupid future bullshit, right? Will they protect you?”

“I... probably not?” I said with very little confidence. “Can't imagine they let me blast through their challenge, not when they have had so long to prepare. I've had these for a while, way before their offer.”

“Well, if you're not gonna get any advantages, I'll go first,” She suggested. “But you can follow right behind me.”

“Fine, I'll try not to rush you,” I smirked, Tessa smacking my shoulder as she stepped up to swing across.

For a minute she watched the top end of the rope, getting a feel for the electric deterrent that sparked and hummed.

“Seems about five or six seconds,” She said, still watching. “Not enough time to correct yourself if you fuck up...”

“So don't,” I answered. “You can do it.”

“I was more worried about you!” She said, half shouting the last word as she jumped, grabbed the rope and swung across the gap, expertly landing on the other side.

I was surprised when she held onto the rope, the seconds counting down. After about two or three seconds she clenched grunting as she got shocked, the muscles in her arm

twitching, spasming hard enough that she dropped the rope, which swing back into place After a moment of recovery she shook her head.

“No way we can just take that and keep swinging,” She explained, rubbing her arm. “Give me a few minutes for my hand to start working again.”

“Yeah, take all the time you need,” I responded, holding back my reprimand, not when I had planned on doing the same thing once I landed on the platform she was now on.

We took a minute or so before Tessa stood up and swung across to the second platform, the last one before the gap with two ropes. I made my first jump relatively easily, landing smoothly and standing up straight, just in time to watch Tessa easily transfer from one rope to the other, landing perfectly on the next platform. I cursed and prepped for my next one, jumping and swinging, landing on the next platform with just a little stumble. Tessa was preparing for her last swinging set, so I stopped and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to calm my stressing heart.

I opened my eyes in time to watch my partner as she lunged to the first rope, actually jumping before the zapping and sparking electricity stopped, timing it so when she grabbed the first rope the electricity was just cutting off, She swung from the first, to the second to the third, jumping off and landing on the platform with a slight skid, recovering easily. After a moment, she turned to look at me.

“Take your time!” She called back. “Try and time it just right to give yourself the most time, especially the last one.”

“Trust me, I will,” I responded, though I was mostly muttering to myself.

I took a minute to watch the sparking, waiting for a good opportunity to jump, waiting for the ropes to stop swinging before looking for a good opportunity. When I saw it I made a running leap, catching the first rope easily. While Tessa had the advantage in speed and dexterity, I did still have a large strength advantage. I could easily hold myself up with one hand for a while, meaning I easel reached out with one hand, grabbing the second rope and holding it tightly, carrying my momentum through into another swing, this time landing on a platform.

“Nice!” Tessa said, pumping her fist. “Now you need as much time as possible, and make sure to really throw yourself into each transfer, or you won't have enough momentum.”

Not trusting my voice, I simply nodded, shaking myself out a bit before getting into the right stance. Once again I waited for the perfect opportunity, trying to get a good sense before running and jumping forward, latching onto the first rope.

I swung through and reached out for the second rope without issue, or at least no issue that I could see. Tessa, however, spotted something immediately.

“Throw yourself into it!” She shouted, but it was too late, I had already started reaching for the third rope.

I grabbed it easily, winging forward as I released the second rope. As I moved forward I finally saw that I didn't have nearly enough momentum. I reached the apex of my swing, feeling myself slow just short of what I needed to land on the next platform feet first. Knowing that the shock would get me though, I took a chance and jumped, throwing myself forward as hard as I could.

I slammed into the side of the platform, my shield flickering at the harshness of the blow, catching a lot of the momentum. It was honestly the only reason the air wasn't completely driven from my chest, which would have made scrambling to keep from sliding off impossible. Tessa was there a moment later, taking my hand and helping me pull myself up, scrambling as she fell backward, managing to pull me up until I was more on than off, letting me slide forward.

I immediately rolled over onto my back and spread myself out, the world spinning from the adrenaline and panic pumping through my body. Tessa kneeled beside me for a moment, looking down at me, our eyes connecting. She almost immediately slid down against me, holding onto me as we both recovered from what had just happened.

Chapter 19

We spent about twenty minutes laying down on the platform. Eventually Tessa sat up, looking back on the rope segment.

“We gotta get going,” she said, prompting me to sit up as well. “We need enough time to look for shelter, as much as I would like to take a break.”

I nodded and stood up carefully, helping her get up right after. We both turned to the rest of “obstacle course,” analyzing what obstacles we had left. With the rope swing completed we had reached the halfway point of the bridge, distance wise at least, with three sections left. The first one was the spiked platforms, which now that we were closer looked a lot more serious. From a distance the spikes looked dangerous but not lethal, but now it was clear that they would absolutely destroy my feet if I was standing on them.

Past that was the spinning blades, a series of wide spinning arms with sharp blades, some which we would have to jump over and some that we would have to duck under. The blades all spun from a central point, and the third one was going significantly faster than the first. The last challenge was a series of near vertical platforms, hanging bars and ropes that we

would have to climb through, all while parts moved up and down drastically, slamming into place with enough force to test our grip.

Once we had delayed for another few minutes, Tessa let out a growl. I could tell she was annoyed at herself for putting it off, or at least something like that. Before I could say anything, she was gone, jumping to the first platform, quickly jumping to the next, zig zagging from platform to platform. It took a second for me to follow her, as I had to wait for the pattern to come around again, but I was soon hot on her tail. We both had a few close calls, with Tessa managing to avoid having to jump backwards, but I had to backtrack twice, almost getting my feet impaled in the process.

When I finally landed on the platform in between sections Tessa had been waiting a full two minutes for me. She didn't say anything, but turned around to start on the next section.

"Fucking hell Tessa, give me a second, will you?" I asked, reaching out and grabbing her arm.

"Fine, fine," She said, letting out a deep breath. "I just..."

"Don't want to let them think they are winning?"

"...yeah."

"They don't care about winning, Tessa," I explained, letting her arm go. "Or at least, not like you think. They don't care about us surviving or standing up to them. They make money either way, which means in their mind they always win. Just focus on making it through, alright?"

She nodded, and after a few minutes began making our way through the next challenged, the long spinning blades. We jumped from platform platform, each only about three feet wide, stopping to jump up over one blade, quickly ducking under another. At first glance the blades were going too slow to do any actual damage, but as we got closer it was clear they weren't normal knives. A high pitched whine told me they were vibrating, which probably meant they would slice through us ridiculously easy. It also meant we would slide right off if we tried to jump on the thick metal blade itself.

Still, as lethal as it was, we slowly made our way through, taking our time until the last set of blades and platforms, where we had to rush through to avoid getting stuck in a no-win situation. Tessa crossed easily, making her last jump with a little boost from her jumping boots, easily going over one of the blades made to be ducked under, landing on the next in between platform. I was forced to take it a bit slower, but soon joined her before our final challenged.

By now, the next side was tantalizingly close, and we both had to visibly calm ourselves to keep from rushing through to make it to solid ground.

The last challenge was a series of jumps between ropes, hand bars, wall jumps and several other things, a final gauntlet before we were finally done. Most of it boiled down to core strength, which meant that in an odd twist, this last section would be easier for me than it was for Tessa, ignoring the fact that all of this required reflexes and the fact that the wall jumps required almost perfect timing. Still, since I had the advantage, I went first, jumping from the platform to a series of monkey bar-like grips. We both agreed that we would wait until the other was done, since there was no place to pause if someone needed a second to collect themselves.

I made my way through the gauntlets easily enough, my enhanced muscles easily handling my own weight, making it much less difficult to judge the jumps and grabs. The hardest part was jumping from a bar, onto a near vertical platform and then jumping back off to grab a rope. They had to do this twice, the whole point to get around a solid wall blocking the way. By the time I landed my arms were actually tired, despite my enhancements.

Luckily, while Tessa's enhancements were more for speed, her stamina was also improved. This would hopefully mean she could complete this despite not being tailored to brute forcing her way through.

I held my breath as she started, slowly making her way through the course. Her enhanced reflexes meant that she wasn't in danger of missing a jump out a hand bar. Her biggest issue would be keeping up her strength. I could see her getting tired, slowing down quite a bit after making it through the wall jump barriers. I could also see her determination, forcing herself to keep going, despite her obvious struggle. When she finally jumped from the last point onto the platform I half caught her, keeping her from collapsing or stumbling as we walked away from the edge. Once we were both on solid asphalt again, that was when we dropped.

We sat down, slowly leaning against each other as we caught our breath and processed what we had managed to survive. Tessa leaned her head back, looking up and resting on my shoulder, our backs together.

"So what, still no reward for jumping through their hoops?" She eventually asked after we had both calmed down. "Seems kinda like we deserve a reward for making it through that."

I wordlessly pulled up my map, activating it before putting my arm down again, shaking my head.

"Nothing on the map," I responded. "At least nothing nearby. There's a blue somewhere that way, and a green that way."

I pointed off into the distance twice, away from the road, gesturing to where the nearest caches were. After taking another look at the map I continued.

“By the way, we are gonna cross into where there aren't any more caches pretty soon. We never really talked about it... Should we hunt down a few more before heading on?”

“Is there any we could reach by the end of the day?”

“...No, not that I can see at least,” I admitted. “Closest is like a full day of travel away.”

“Then let's focus on the road to the colden point. We can't risk either of us getting injured and forcing us to slow down again,” She explained, letting out a long breath. “We have some spare time, but it's less than I would like, especially if something major happens. If we stumble on one thats within a shorter distance... we can discuss it when it happens.”

“Alright, a good a plan as any.”

We sat together for another ten or so minutes before we finally stood up and continued on our journey, leaving the bizarre, dangerous obstacle course behind us. About five minutes in Tessa let out a chuckle, quickly devolving into giggles and laughter, going on for long enough that she had to lean on me.

“What was that about?” I asked when she had finally calmed down enough to speak.

“I'm- oh god. I'm just imaging the poor wander trader or explorer stumbling on the bridge and wondering what the fuck is going on,” She said, still fighting her chuckles. “Even ignoring the fact that its built out of super advanced bullshit, imagine trying to figure out what the fuck its for!”

I snorted and joined her in a new round of laughing, both of us eventually sitting down. It felt good to laugh, and neither of us commented just how much of it was hysterics. When we had finally recovered enough to move, we headed back down the road, occasionally adding new bits to the joke as they came to us.

After about an hour of walking we once again started the process of looking for a place to sleep. Thankfully, about thirty minutes later we stumbled into a rest stop, just off the side of the highway. We quietly explored the mostly concrete and brick building, making sure to clear it as best we could before eventually setting down in a break room, which luckily only had one room. We dropped off our bags and did a little more exploring, managing to find a few bags of preserved food in the shop, as well as a few cans of soda from what looked like a burger place of some kind.

We settled down and enjoyed a small feast, even pouring our soda into our chilling canteen, which we had already drained after completing the obstacle course.

“What do you think is next?” Tessa asked, crumpling up an empty bag of crackers and throwing it out the door of the break room. “We’ve had killer drones and an obstacle course, what do you think they are going to try and kill us with next?”

I pulled up my map again, taking a sip of my cold soda while I considered the distance we had left.

“Well...if the dark warehouse was the first trick they pulled, and the drones were the second... it looks like they wait a certain distance before hitting us with another one,” I said, Tessa leaning on my shoulder to see the map better as I pointed at it. “If they keep following that... We might have two more? Not including whatever final challenge they have.”

“Yeah, alright, assuming they care enough to actually follow a pattern,” Tessa responded. “But *what* do they have in store, that's what really matters.”

“I don’t know, hopefully something easy,” I said, Tessa snorting in response. “Maybe something we can skip if we are lucky.”

“Oh, finally agreeing that skipping is a good idea?”

“If we can make it entertaining? Sure,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t know Tessa, there are a lot of things that they could do. I kind of don’t want to jinx it.”

“I bet it's something bigger,” Tessa said, ignoring my warning. “They seem to be getting larger and larger in scale, right?”

“...yeah, seems to be that way,” I admitted, shaking my head. “What could be bigger than an entire highway bridge?”

“... Two highway bridges?”

I shook my head and threw a chocolate bar wrapped at Tessa, the woman chuckling as I did. Eventually we finished up eating and cleared out a space for us to sleep. Earlier, Tessa had carried each of us a pile of dish towels to use as pillows. We laid down on the floor, both of us quickly falling asleep.

The next morning we filled out packs with whatever food and drinks we could, after eating another large meal for breakfast. When we were done, we both took the time to use three large bottles of water each to wash off using the pile of towels we had slept on to dry off. I thanked whoever was watching that all of my clothes were now the advanced clothes from white crates, because I didn’t want to imagine how horrible it would be putting on the same pair of pants after having just washed off.

When we were clean and ready, we set back out, making our way back to the highway and heading off.

Chapter 20

We made great progress over the next several days.

A combination of high spirits, an eagerness to get off this hellworld and a deep seeded determination meant that we were both willing to go the extra mile to make as much progress as possible each day. We would wake up early, leave almost immediately and travel until the last minute, as long as it was safe. When we could we ate on the move, though what we had on hand to eat wasn't always the easiest to manage.

We did hit a couple of issues that slowed us down. A small pack of tuskers attacked us two days after crossing the bridge. We had just gotten off the large road system we had been following for so long, making our way through a small pit-stop town when it happened. Luckily, by now we were more than ready to handle four medium sized mutants, and we quickly dispatched them, with Tessa's new enhanced arrows proving to be extremely effective, even with their thick hide.

Once the pack of mutant boar was dispatched we spent a bit of time scaving the town, finding a decent amount of food before moving on, eventually taking cover for the night in a concrete structure just outside of town. Tessa claimed it was some sort of public storage space, but it looked a bit over-built for that to me. Either way it served as a decent place to catch some sleep. When we were settled I started a fire and we ate a large meal of boar meat, saving the scavenged food for on the road

Over the next few days we continued to travel, the tension rising slowly every passing day. We were due another absurd, artificial challenge, and every step that we didn't find made us more and more worried about what we would eventually stumble into. It wasn't until we stumbled into another small town that we finally found it.

At first, neither of us realized anything was happening, five skelly-wolves ambushing us out of nowhere. It wasn't until the first canine mutant that Tessa took down stood back up that we realized something was very off. The bone plated mutants had an arrow through its chest, an injury that should have definitely killed it, or at least kept it down as the arrow punched through a lot of important muscles and organs. Instead it just stood back up and joined its packmates in attacking us.

"Did you see that?" Tessa asked, kicking one of the mutants off of the car we were standing on.

"I did!" I shouted back, slamming my axe into the side of another wolf. "Keep hitting them, hopefully there's a limit!"

We held them off for another ten minutes before we had finally done enough damage to the obviously enhanced mutants. Sinking my axe into its skull, even after it had collapsed and stopped moving only seemed prudent after the fifth and six times they stood back up.

"What... the fuck... was that?" Tessa asked, breathing heavily despite her own enhancements.

"Probably... what we would... be capable... of with a dozen.... health serums," I responded, equally out of breath.

"They... go that high?" She responded, giving me a harsh look. "We should have been looking for more!"

"No, I don't think our version stacks that high, I was kidding," I admitted, shaking my head. "It's probably some other serum or modification."

"I want one."

"I don't," I said with a shiver. "There is now way they were really still alive, noit after how many times I caved their skulls in. They must have been being controlled or puppeted by something because brain injuries like that don't heal with memories or whatever still intact."

"Oh... god yeah that's gross," She said, realizing what I meant.

We spent a few minute recovering before dragging the wolves into a nearby wooden building, some sort of store that had half collapsed. Once they were inside Tessa started a fire, which quickly spread until the whole store was in flames, the wolf burning inside. It was probably paranoia, but I really didn't want to wake up to a pack of unkillable mutant wolves any time soon. Plus who knows what would happen if another mutant ate them, I did not want to find out if the enhancements could pass on.

When we were certain the fire would keep going, we quickly left the town behind, not stopping until we found a place to stay in the basement of a small house. We blocked the entrances and sat down to tend to our wounds, which were shockingly minor. I had a few bit marks on my arms, and one on my thigh, and Tessa had one on her leg, but luckily nothing near the how bad I had gotten bitten by one of the canine mutants so long ago.

With our healing enhancements we would be fine in a few days. We wouldn't even have to take it easy in the meantime.

“We got really fucking lucky,” Tessa said, wrapping up my arm to keep blood from getting everywhere, since both of us were immune to infections. “Anything more serious than these bites and we would be in trouble.”

“We could make it,” I assured her. “We have some spare time. Not as much as I would like, but we have like... an extra week maybe?”

“Not nearly enough for a broken bone Leon,” She pointed out.

“I know. But we would find a way,” I said, continuing to assure her, shifting as she finished my arm so I could bandage her leg. “We are going home Tessa, if one of us has to carry the other.”

She shook her head, but said nothing, letting me wrap up her leg before sitting back on the old dusty couch. After a long few minutes she nodded to my arm.

“What's the map look like?”

“I checked it earlier...” I said, pulling it up again so she could see it. “Our theory of the challenges being a broken up event? I think that was wrong. The stretch between the bridge and today is almost a full six days. If that repeats we will only be a few days away from the golden point, which I don't think they would do... Well I hope they won't.”

“So there's a chance we are done with these challenges?”

“Until we reach the final one?” I clarified, Tessa nodding. “If we get really lucky...maybe.”

Once again, the next morning we headed out on what was hopefully the last leg of our journey. Our destination was closer than ever, and while we were still worried about what we had to face, focusing on the hope that we wouldn't have to deal with any more bullshit before that final challenge made each step feel lighter.

Slowly but surely we left the town behind us, finding ourselves back on another long stretch of road. It was smaller than the highway we had just navigated, but no less jam packed with old cars. The first fifteen minutes worth of vehicles were charred and sagging, seemingly softened by an intense fire that spread from car to car. I could only hope they were empty when it started.

“... You know, we didn't think that fire through very much,” I said as we walked between burnt out wrecks. “Think it's gonna spread?”

“The shop?” She asked, shaking her head when I hummed in confirmation. “No, its been raining pretty consistently so nothing is really dry. Plus there was some clear space around it, and not a whole lot of nearby trees.”

“Do fires like that happen?”

“Sometimes if it gets really dry,” She responded with a shrug. “But I’ve never seen one up close.”

We spent another three days on that road and one it connected too, taking shelter in a mostly intact van one night, and another truck for the second. On the third night we found a small house right off one of the roads. We barricaded it as best we could, before taking shifts since we were just hanging out on the first floor, rather than a hidden attic or a protected basement.

Things started to get tense once again as we continued on for the next two days, both of us just waiting for the second shoe to drop. We ended up being much more quiet than usual as we were both affected by the tension. On the fourth day, seven since the regenerating wolf mutants, I had finally had enough.

“I think we can finally focus on the gold dot,” I said as we walked past a broken down building. “We are only three days away from the golden dot, and we haven’t seen anything. Unless we missed something, I don’t think they are going to try anything. It wouldn’t be fair.”

Tess stopped and turned to me, one eyebrow raised as she looked at me. I rolled my eyes and reluctantly nodded.

“Yes, expecting a noble to care about fairness is a stretch, but remember that they want this to be entertaining,” I pointed out. “Crippling us so the big finale just kills us outright, especially when we have made it so far, doesn’t sound very entertaining, does it?”

“...Alright, I can see that logic at least,” Tessa admitted. “Do you think they approved of us trying to break down what they have prepared like this?”

“Are you kidding me? For nobles finding loopholes and taking advantage of lopsided deals is practically a sacred duty,” I said, shaking my head. “I doubt they even realized not doing it was an option.”

Tessa laughed, and we both focused back on walking, pushing ourselves to reach our destination. We stayed in an old church basement, sealing up the entrance with a bookcase before sleeping on a bed of old sheets.

The next day started off as most of the traveling days did, waking up early and making as much progress as possible during the safest part of the day. We crossed another bridge, this one much smaller and not turned into a massive death trap. It was still a bit nerve wracking though, because without any outside repairs it was a lot less sturdy. Several times we had to jump over holes or carefully climb past worry cracks.

After the bridge we made more forward progress, stopping at one point after spotting some worrying tracks in the dirt. Tessa did eventually conclude that they were old enough not to worry about, and that we were probably safe. We still hastily crossed through the general area, both of us on high alert, weapons out and ready.

Pretty soon, with another couple days of travel, we were finally reaching the golden dot. We were cautiously making progress at this point, worried that our final challenge would jump out and ambush us at any minute.

As we slowly climbed a hill, following a broken and cracked road, we both agreed that it would be better to stop on top to start looking for the target. Chances were that we would be able to spot it, and Tessa desperately wanted to avoid walking into another enhanced skelly wolf situation, which I agreed wholeheartedly with. We got to the top of the hill after a short walk, carefully looking around every house we passed, our blood pressure rising as we did. The golden mark on my map was still a long way out, long enough that we would probably be fine, but it was hard to fight the anticipation anxiety.

When we finally reached the top of the hill, which was surprisingly big, we climbed on top of one of the taller houses we could see, before looking around as best we could. Luckily, the houses were built on a relatively cleared out hill, the overgrowth sticking to thick, gnarled bushes and shrubs rather than larger trees. We could see clearly out over the town, all the way to the park that marked the center. It was a decent sized town, with four main roads leading to that center park, which also just happened to be where my map said our ticket back home was.

With her zoom glasses, it didn't take long for Tessa to spot what was different about this town.

"There.... There are robots," She said, like she didn't believe what she was saying. "Dozens of them... no, more like hundreds. It's... it's like they populated the entire town with them!"