

I spent twenty minutes getting our new charges into their new gear. Dr. Salinado helped her daughter put on the stab vest, then the jacket, followed by her thickest pair of pants. I then passed the obviously nervous mother a roll of duct tape and a pair of scissors.

"The most likely source of transmission is through bites of the infected," I explained. "Tape her pants to her shoes and her gloves to the sleeves of the jacket to cover as much skin as possible. Then... you need to cut her hair to keep them from being able to grab it. Then we will do the same for you."

"Why aren't you done up like that?" She asked, starting to sound annoyed. "Two of your people had long hair, and I didn't see any tape on any of you."

"The process you just saw, the fading out?" I asked, the woman nodding with a wince. "It doesn't transport diseases, viruses, or even injuries. There is someone watching us from the other side, so even if we are about to die, we will get pulled away. Getting bitten is not an issue for us. Which brings up a good point. Do not put yourself in danger for any of us. We literally cannot really die while we are here, which means sacrificing ourselves is absolutely on the table. So don't get any heroic ideas."

She looked at me with wide eyes, no doubt trying to fathom just what the hell she had gotten herself into. After a moment, still subconsciously running her fingers through her hair, she shook herself and nodded. Quickly, while whispering soothing things to her daughter, the mother roughly cut her long hair. It was obviously a rough job, leaving the young girl with short, stubby hair barely an inch long. By the time her mother was done, Amanda had watery, teary eyes. Thankfully, by some miracle, she didn't cry save a few heartbroken sobs.

When she was done duct-taping the gaps in her clothing shut, even managing to fasten the collar of the jacket up to protect her neck, she passed the duct tape to me, and I repeated the process on the older woman. I made quick work of her hair while she was biting her lip, then sealed up the gaps in her clothes. When I was done, I took a step back and admired my work.

They both looked a bit stupid, but after Dr. Salinado flexed and went through a few motions to check we hadn't accidentally restricted her movement, I called the job done. After one last look around, the doctor scooped up her daughter, holding her close as she followed me out of her apartment. I snagged my spear as we left, stepping out into the hall to see Danny and Kate standing over a body, the door on the other side having been smashed open.

"Sorry, we just finished," Danny explained. "We were about to knock."

"It's fine. How bad was it?"

As I asked, I leaned over the middle-aged, pot-bellied corpse of a man. Beyond the normal signs of zombification, he also had a sizable hole in his forehead and a deep slice on his waist. The less said about what was coming out of those wounds, the better.

"... I don't want to jinx it, sir, but..."

"Then don't. We will get a chance to find out for ourselves. But don't get complacent."

"Right. Paranoia is the key..."

"For this jump, at least," I said, looking over at Dr. Salinado as she whispered into her daughter's ears, telling her to keep her eyes closed. "Were are-"

Before I could finish asking about them, George, Barry, and Jessica came around the corner, looking untouched.

"Hallways is still clear," Barry said, stopping to look down at the corpse before looking over at me and whispering. "Well... 'cept this. Should we be double-tapping them... or beheading them or something? I remember Resident Evil zombies don't usually stay down, even with headshots."

"I think that's just a game mechanic," I said, kicking the corpse in the leg. "The lore was pretty clear, destroying the brain kills them, you just gotta make sure you do a good job..."

I lowered my spear and, with a jab, drove the tip through the zombie temple. The infected corpse didn't move save a little shake from the impact.

"But, Better safe than sorry," I said, yanking my weapon free of the the corpse.

With the corpse taken care of, I turned to the rest of the group, getting everyone's attention.

"Alright, here's how this is going to go. Dr. Salinado, we aren't familiar with the city, so you are our directions. Don't worry about finding a specific point. Let's just focus on getting out of the city for now."

The doctor nodded, and I turned to look at my team. At this point, I was just reiterating an already agreed-upon plan, both to hammer it home and so that the doctor could hear it.

"Jessica, Barry, you're with me. We are the speartip. Danny and Kate, you are the backguard. It's your job to keep things from sneaking up on us. George, you're in charge of Dr. Salinado and Amanda. Stay with them like glue and keep them safe, and not just from the infected. This is gonna suck real bad if Dr. Salinado rolls an ankle halfway through the trip."

George nodded before looking over at the doctor and nodding to her as well. She gave him a small smile in return before focusing back on me.

"Doctor, how many miles would you say it is to the outskirts of the city?"

"Four or five miles for the dense area, a few more to leave the city entirely," She responded with a frown. "A few hours while walking."

"Unfortunately, it's going to take quite a bit longer than that. We have less than three days to get you well clear of the city, but there is a lot standing between us and that," I explained. "Anyone have any questions? No? Then let's get to it."

I turned and headed back to the stairwell with Jessica and Barry right beside me. We made it to the door, peeking through the window and opening it when we saw the other side was clear. Once Danny and Kate were in, we closed the door behind us and slowly started making our way down the remaining stairs. Four stories down, and we ran into the first roadblock.

There, on the next landing, was a pair of zombies kneeling over a heavily mutilated corpse, furiously feasting on the remains. The amount of blood and viscera was horrifying, but somehow, I managed to strangle down my rising gorge. Silently, I motioned Barry forward, the both of us slowly walking down the remaining stairs. We managed to get several feet of the infected before the one on the further side of the corpse noticed us and slowly began to stand.

I rushed forward and jabbed out with my spear, impaling the standing zombie in its neck, missing its head by only a few inches. Barry was right behind me, catching the still-eating infected unaware, managing to drive his spear into the back of his target's head, the zombie twitching before collapsing forward.

Despite having missed my first strike, I did hit the zombie hard enough to knock him back a few steps. Even as Barry's kill slid off the end of his spear, I yanked mine free and tried again, this time focusing on accuracy rather than impact. The dragon tooth tip did most of the work, punching through the zombie's skull with a crack. I gave the spear a twist, carving up the zombie's brain with the slightly curved tooth before yanking it out and letting the blood-covered monster collapse.

Both of the infected fell slumped to the ground, the one that had started struggling to their feet slamming down a bit harder, making disturbing sounds as it landed on the corpse it had been previously consuming.

"Jesus Christ," George said from behind me. "That's the most horrifying thing I have ever seen in my entire life."

"So far," Kate said from further up the steps, pulling up the rear. "It's the most horrifying thing you've seen so far."

We all turned to look at her, the tall woman shrugging at the attention, clearly not impressed by the display.

"Unfortunately, she isn't wrong. We just need to push through," I said, gathering my feelings on the subject and tamping them down hard.

I could develop long-standing issues due to repressed trauma later.

I led the way over the corpses, slowly making our way further down until we eventually arrived at the bottom floor. Not too far away was the front entrance of the building, a set of glass and wooden doors that were already smashed open. Slowly but surely, we progressed to the lobby, stopping just before it.

After pausing to make sure the doors along the hall weren't about to blow apart to reveal a horde, Barry and I stepped forward into the main room. The second I approached the edge, planning on coming around so I didn't have such a blind corner, a zombie flailed out past it. It awkwardly lunged at me, trying its best to reach out and grab hold of my arm. I had just enough time to raise my spear out perpendicular to myself, stopping its violent lunge.

"I got you. Just hold still," Barry said before I could even call out.

He stepped to my side, raised his spear, and jammed it into the zombie's head, the tip puncturing the temple to drive all the way into the brain. He did the same sort of swirling cut I had done previously, and the zombie collapsed, almost tearing my spear away from me as it did.

"Dammit..."

I cursed, quickly checking the rest of the room for any more infected zombies. This was exactly what I wanted to avoid, getting ambushed around every corner. I was just glad I had managed to stop it from biting me. I would have never lived that down, not after talking about how important it was to be paranoid about every corner.

When I couldn't see any other zombies in the room, I motioned for Jessica to check around a desk and for Barry to check a small staff-only hall to the right. Both of them moved out, and I stepped forward to the door, glass crunching under my boots as I did. When everyone gathered together, including the rest of our party, I slowly peeked out into the street through the now-empty door.

From where I was, I could already see five more zombies, including the poor woman with an unnaturally flat, brick-patterned forehead across the street. I could also see a handful more in both directions, as well as a pair of burning vehicles down to the left. I pulled back inside, letting out a sigh.

"We need to start moving, so it's time to get serious. Dr. Salinado, which way are we going?"

"To the right," She responded. "North is the quickest way out of the city."

"Is there any way to move by the alleyway?" I asked. "The roads have a lot of zombies."

"I... don't think so, not consistently, at least." She said, chewing her lip and rubbing her daughter's head. "I don't know the alleys very well... I think there might be more a few streets down."

"Damn...Fine, we will just have to work our way through it. I could see a bunch of zombies out there, so we are going to have to kill and move. Rear guard, keep an eye out on alcoves as we move past them."

Together, we stepped through the broken doors and out into the streets. Jessica and Barry immediately stepped forward to the right while I walked left, punching my spear through a zombie staring up at a flickering streetlight. As he collapsed to the ground and I had double-checked that his brain was carved up, I turned to see Jessica holding a third zombie at bay with the blunt end of her weapon while Barry lined up a clean shot. Two corpses already lay at their feet as the third was quickly dispatched to join them.

We quickly cleared the immediate area, including a pair of infected that came tumbling out from behind a dumpster, bloody hands, and mouths showing exactly what they were doing there. Danny and Kate spotted them immediately as we shifted out into the road, dispatching them both pretty simply.

As we continued to move, slowly making our way down the abandoned, trash-choked streets, we continually had to kill zombie after zombie. Several times, we passed stores, apartments, or other buildings with shadowy movement inside, or even the occasionally hungry groan and determined slam as whatever was inside tried to get out.

We cut a bloody path through the city streets as we headed north. Several times we had to bypass car accidents and burning or collapsed buildings, taking side streets and alleyways to do so. Twice, we narrowly avoided running into infected hordes, barely managing to escape the notice of the slowly shambling zombies.

So far, we were making solid progress, completing the mile and a half as the sun started to rise, a concept that was oddly alien to the clearly choking, dying city. The sky was still thickly overcast, so it wasn't what I would call bright, but the fact that I could clearly see was very welcome. As the sun rose higher and higher, the fatigue of constantly killing and moving was catching up to most of the group, with Barry, Kate, and myself the least affected.

Eventually, I called us to a stop, gesturing to a small alley between two concrete buildings. The far side was blocked by a thick metal grate, and with the ever-increasing light, I could see it was completely clear.

"Alright, we are going to take a short break and recover some of our stamina," I explained, getting a thankful look from Dr. Salinado. "Barry, watch that side, and I'll watch this side. We can trade out in fifteen. We can't stay long, though. I really want to take advantage of the daylight. One hour, and we move."

Everyone settled in to rest, sitting down around the alley save for Barry and me. I handed Jessica my backpack, and she went through what Dr. Salinado packed. After a minute of looking, she handed out a pair of granola bars each to everyone, giving one bottle of water to Dr. Salinado and Amanda while the rest of us split another two.

Eventually, I traded places with Jessica, sitting down and relaxing further into the alley, the tension slowly leaving my body, though there was still plenty sticking around. It was hard to really unclench in a city with who knows how many horrors walking around it. At the thought of some of the horrors, I quickly looked up, mentally kicking myself for taking so long to check. Thankfully, it was clear, prompting a sigh of relief. I leaned back against the brick wall behind me, doing my best to ignore the grimy spot we had settled in.