

I moved through the Bastion, gathering everything I needed for my first expedition since Sally had anchored herself to me. It was a pitifully easy task, just grabbing my machete and strapping it to my leg and belt before grabbing my bags. I was wearing basic clothes with no ranged option, no first aid kit, and no tools. My leather jacket was the closest thing I had to armor, and who knows how much protection it would actually give me.

I had a long list of things I would need to get before I was even close to confident about my survival outside the Bastion.

Still, I would never get there if I didn't take the first steps, and I refused to die starving to death or huddling in the corner as people ruined my- *humanity's* last big chance. I quickly ate a can of mixed vegetables and a bag of chips before drinking some water from an empty soda can I filled from the sink. As I did, Sally bobbed up and around me.

"You realize there are glasses and things in the cabinets, right?" She asked, seeming to stare at the re-used can despite having no eyes that I could see.

"...No, I didn't know that," I admitted, shaking my head, throwing the can in the trash. "Alright, I'm ready to go. You sure you can't come with me?"

"I can join you to the outer limits of the Bastions range," She responded, following me as I headed to the front entrance. "I am afraid that is as far as I can go at the moment."

I nodded, stepping out of the Bastion's living space and closing the thick, reinforced wooden doors behind me. They clunked shut with a low, metallic sound, prompting me to look at Sally.

"I can lock or unlock them on command," She explained. "But none of the doors here are locked for you."

"Handy."

I quickly descended down to the first level of parapets before turning quickly to walk down the last set of stairs. Stepping onto the grass, I looked out across the massive clearing, getting my first look at it from the ground. The space was huge and stuck out from the surrounding apartments, buildings, and stores like a sore thumb. Still, I had a feeling that as the Bastion started to expand, it wouldn't seem that big anymore.

Shaking my head at the ridiculousness that was my life, I oriented myself to the buildings that I recognized until I was facing east. Taking one last long breath and letting it, I started to walk, crossing the clearing with a grimace. I was entirely in the open now. Anyone could spot me.

"Where are you heading?" Sally asked as she bobbed along beside me. "Any particular target?"

"Yeah. There is a police station about a mile and a half that way," I explained, pointing eastward. "Chances are it's already been looted, but it's as good a target as anything."

"Good idea!" She said encouragingly. "Are you hoping to find people?"

"I... Yes, having more people around will help, but I'm worried I will stumble on the wrong type of people," I admitted, almost at the halfway point of the clearing. "The police station will help with that, assuming it has anything worthwhile. I'll feel more confident going out to find people if I'm armed."

We crossed the rest of the distance in silence, and I eventually took my first step onto an asphalt road. I turned to look back at Sally and the Bastion behind her. It was an impressive sight, a miniature castle sitting in the middle of a perfectly flat grassy field. I could tell that Sally had turned around as well to get a look.

"It's only going to get more impressive," She happily pointed out.

"I know, I'm looking forward to it," I responded. "I'll be back before it gets dark. Getting stuck out overnight sounds like a special kind of hell. Do me a favor and come meet me when I get back so you can confirm the place is empty or warn me we aren't alone."

"Will do! Good Luck!"

I nodded again and turned around, ignoring the rising urge to turn around and run back to the castle. It was relatively safe for now, but I wanted to *always* be safe. To do that, I would have to put myself in danger.

I looked around, walking on the road with the sidewalk on my right side, staying alongside the many cars stuck on the road. As I walked, I noticed they seemed to be jammed together in batches, some roads full of stranded and abandoned vehicles, with others staying relatively clear. I made sure to look through each car I passed, figuring that many people would have thrown stuff into their trunk before leaving and then abandoned it when they ran.

Many people hadn't had the opportunity to run, judging from the horrific smell, plentiful blood splatter, and the occasional chewed limb. Still, even with how many signs of death I passed, I couldn't help but wonder just what had happened to everyone. I knew this town had at least thirty thousand people in it. There were signs of people dying everywhere, but given how silent it was, there should have been more.

Before I could continue that train of thought, the sounds of movement reached my ears, and I quickly ducked lower, hiding behind a burned-out SUV, trying to ignore the smell of

charred pork. I slowly moved along it, peeking out and around a cracked and melted tail light, trying to see what had made the noise.

There, across the street, was a pack of four silver-gray cats, each the size of a mountain lion, hissing and yowling at each other. Between them was the large corpse of a large domestic dog, half-eaten and barely recognizable. As one of them batted at another, I saw that they had horns jutting from their heads, arching forward from above their eyes. All of them were stained with blood.

Silently, I shifted back into the full cover of the large vehicle, mentally cursing. Looking to my left, I could see the start of a low fence, just barely tall enough for me to crouch behind. Taking a quiet, slow breath, I peeked one more time to make sure the large felines were still busy eating before crossing to the next car while crouched, heading behind the fence. Slowly but surely, I followed it, taking it as slowly as possible to avoid making any sound.

I could have *maybe* taken one of those things, assuming they didn't have some sort of hidden surprise, but I didn't like my chances with any more than that.

After nearly five minutes of slowly crawling, I looked around to see if I was far enough away. I could still see the group of cat monsters, but at this distance, I felt a bit better about moving quickly. I quickly abandoned the fence crawl in favor of a speed crouch walk along a row of cars

As I made my way to where I knew the police station was, I continued to peek into cars, occasionally opening one up and sliding things into my duffel. Most of it was random bits of food, things left behind in blind panic, or because they weren't worth going back for. It was a strange assortment of food, but all of what I took was shelf-stable.

About twenty minutes before I reached the station, I happened to look at one car parked in the middle of a small lawn. There, embedded in the shattered windshield of a car, was a crowbar. I reached over and slowly pulled it out, giving it a once over before pulling off my pack to strap it securely along the back.

I continued to move, slowly making progress across the remaining half-mile-long stretch of Danten's lower-end neighborhoods. I stopped a few more times, once to snag a basic car tool kit from the back seat of a truck, as well as a pair of worn but sturdy gloves, taking a minute to strap them on. With any luck, they would help keep my fingers intact.

Between the tool kit, random bits of food, and a few other things, I quickly filled up my duffel bag, and rather than lug it around, I stashed it underneath the porch of a random house. With the loot stored, I focused on moving quietly, ignoring the cars and anything else. My backpack was empty, but I was saving it to hopefully fill with stuff from the police station.

Freshly unburdened, I made quick time across the remaining distance to my destination. It was amazing how much energy my body had despite how much crawling, crouching, jumping, and moving I had done. I was never horrifically out of shape, mostly because my jobs usually required a bit of physical activity, but that had nothing on me now. I felt like I could run a marathon. Hell, there was nothing "could" about it. A marathon would probably be fucking easy if what Sally had said about my adjustment said was true.

Finally, after a long while of slow progress, I arrived at the police station, only to stare at it in shock. The entire place had been decked out like something out of a video game, with sandbag barriers, windows barricaded with scrap wood and metal sheeting, and police cars parked in a ring around the main entrance. There was also an incredible amount of bodies, both human and monster.

This had *clearly* been someone's last stand.

As I slowly approached the apocalyptic scene, I was forced to step over dozens of monster corpses. There were more of the same cats I had seen on the way, as well as a handful of the large, velociraptor-like lizards I had spotted pinned between two cars. There was even a new abomination I hadn't seen before. As far as I could tell, it was some sort of hairy, four-legged rodent, not much bigger than a toddler. All of them had been chewed and feasted on, including the six human corpses I found as I approached the entrance.

Whispering an apology, I quickly searched each person, but none of them had anything worthwhile. Someone must have been here after me to grab their guns because all of the monster corpses showed signs of being shot to death, and there were hundreds of bullet casings on the ground. That meant someone had survived their last stand or someone else was looting the town.

I climbed the remaining stairs, gingerly stepping through the smashed glassed doors into the station, my eyes on a swivel as I did. Inside was a mess, with more dead creatures and people. On one hand, it was horrifying and made me regret taking so long to get my ass in gear. These people had been dead for a few days, but if Sally had anchored me a few days earlier, I could have offered them a much better place to live, one where they wouldn't have to worry about the smaller monsters at all.

I shook my head, forcing myself to push the dark, swirling thoughts to the side. There was nothing I could do about it now, anyway.

I was just kneeling down to gently check the closest body for anything when the sound of a shout came from somewhere deeper in the building. I stood up, yanking the machete from its sheath, holding it like I somehow had any idea how to use it.

For a long moment, the entire building was silent again before finally another shout echoed into the room, followed by a single gunshot. I burst into action, running in the direction of

the sound, desperate to find the source. If there were still survivors of this last stand, I needed to save them.

I ran down two flights of stairs, the shouting getting louder as I moved, finally becoming understandable as I stepped into the entrance area of a large shooting range. Through the glass I could see four people, three guys around my age and a much older guy, slowly approaching another woman my age, who was standing next to a younger girl, maybe around twelve or thirteen.

The woman my age looked rough, with a cut to her cheek, a bandage on her arm, and one on her leg, the latter of which was leaking blood through the white cloth. She was visibly leaning on the younger girl with one arm, the other holding a revolver with a shaking hand. In front of her was another person slumped to the ground in a pool of their own blood.

"I said stay back!" She shouted, "I swear to go. I will kill every last one of you fuckers!"

"Sweetheart, I can clearly see you're almost out of ammo," The older man said with a smirk. "You got two bullets left, you really wanna piss us off any more than you already have?"

"Why? Can't you just fuck off?" She asked. "I will kill you, so just fuck off!"

"After what your brother did to us?" He asked with a snort. "He hounded my family for years and sent two of my kids to jail!"

"And he is dead!" She shouted back. "Just like everyone else! So please, just leave us alone!"

I quickly peeled off my pack and sat it on the ground before walking around and stepping into the proper range area. The woman's eyes immediately locked on me, but I raised my finger to my lips to stay quiet. She looked conflicted, but one of the younger guys took a big step forward, forcing her to focus her attention on him.

"Listen, there's-"

I vaulted over the barrier into the firing lanes, making just enough noise to catch the older man's attention. Unfortunately for him, he was in hitting distance, so I slashed downward at him, slamming the machete into his skull. I could feel his skull crack as I drove the chunk of sharpened steel into his head, the older man's eyes rolling up immediately, dropping to the ground like someone cut his strings. As he fell, he almost yanked my machete from my hand.

The sound of their assumed leader flopping to the ground caught the attention of two of the closer men, the closets of which had a baseball bat with fucking *nails* in it. He immediately charged me, but I was ready. Abandoning my weapon, I stepped back before lunging forward again, catching the man off guard and catching his hands as he started to swing the bat

downward. Before he could do anything, I pulled my fist back and slammed it into his side, punching him in what I was hoping was his liver.

He shouted in pain, and I felt something snap under the punch. I immediately punched him again, only this time the bastard pulled away, trying desperately to avoid it. I managed to yank the bat from his hands in the process of his movement, allowing me to cock back a swing and hammer a hit to his knee inward, a direction it was *definitely* not supposed to go.

Before I could even reorient myself to my next target, the woman went on the offensive, stepping forward away from the young girl and putting a bullet through the skull of the man closest to them. The third and final man tried to run but only succeeded in changing which end of his head his brains were blown out of.

With only one of them left alive and his screams getting a bit annoying, I raised my foot and slammed my heel into the chin of the man I had just taken down.