

DEVOURER

THE HUNGER
BOOK 1

JASON BRANT

DEVoured

THE HUNGER #1

JASON BRANT

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CONTENTS

[Also by Jason Brant](#)

[Free Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Free Book](#)

[Also by Jason Brant](#)

[About the Author](#)

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[Decayed #5](#)

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GET THE DARK FREE



Christy Barnett is sleeping when her aging German shepherd Molly growls into the darkness outside her bedroom. She wakes to a dim glow provided by her Kindle's screen, thankful that she had fallen asleep while reading again. The power has gone out, the world outside her window is eerily dark and silent. And Molly is wary of something that waits in the hallway, hiding in the shadows.

A dark cloud has fallen over the city of Aberdeen, MD. The population disappears in an instant. For the handful of survivors, those lucky enough to have a light source not connected to the power grid, it's more than terrifying. They're left alone, walking through a nightmare, and that is a fate that could be worse than death itself.

The darkness is alive and it is the reason we fear the night.

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The tie around Lance's neck might as well have been a noose.

Yet another job interview went horribly as his career circled the drain. He looped a finger over the knot by his throat and pulled it down, letting out a long, depressed sigh. Fourteen years of hard work, certifications, and experience meant nothing anymore.

When the economy lagged like it did now, businesses couldn't invest money in a guy like Lance. A young, dumb, recently graduated college knucklehead could do his job for a quarter of the cost. They wouldn't know what the hell they were doing, but since when did a corporation care about quality over cost?

A decade and a half of setting up networks for government agencies and large corporate offices seemed like a waste of life now. Lance's shoulders sagged as he meandered down the sidewalk, horrified at the idea of having to start a new career at the age of thirty-six.

Traffic honked in the street beside him, people impatient to get past the myriad of one-way streets and rusting bridges that comprised Pittsburgh.

Lance was the exact opposite—the last thing he wanted was to get home and deal with that situation. Telling his soon-to-be ex-wife that he failed to land another job was low on the totem pole of priorities. They rarely saw each other nowadays, but he knew she would be there tonight, ready to judge his latest failure.

They still lived together, unfortunately, as neither could afford to move out. It

made the entire situation unbearable. The nights they spent watching television together in the living room (the only one in their apartment), uncomfortable silence hanging in the air between them, made Lance want to throw himself down the stairs. Granted, that's how most couples' lives were, but having the end of their marriage dangling in front of them made it that much harder to bear.

The warm, spring sun nestled in the clear sky above. Lance tilted his head back, closing his eyes, letting the soothing rays wash over his face. The smell of grilled burger he could no longer afford, wafted through the streets, making his stomach roll over. God, what he wouldn't give to stop in a bar and blow what little cash he had left on a cheeseburger and fries.

He bumped into someone, his legs tangling with theirs as he stumbled forward. The leather portfolio Lance held in his hand fell to the sidewalk, contents spilling out.

"Watch where you're going!"

Lance regained his balance. "Sorry," he mumbled.

The man he ran into brushed himself off and looked up at Lance, his forehead wrinkling. "Lance? Lance York?"

"Yeah?" Lance recognized the man's face, but he couldn't place his name or where he knew him from.

"It's me. Don."

Lance stared at him.

"Don Whitehead! We worked together for SysNet way back when!"

Memories clicked into place. Lance remembered running parallel printer and USB cables alongside Don in his first job out of college. They were fresh-faced dreamers back then, talking about how far they would go and how many giant homes they would buy. The man before him only had a vague resemblance to the one Lance knew back then.

Don wore a black, custom suit that fit his body perfectly. Aviator sunglasses rested in his freshly barbered auburn hair. The slight orange twinge to his complexion hinted at a spray-on tan. He was well put together—a man who had some money to spend on his appearance. Even his posture suggested a high level of confidence.

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Lance said. “Sorry, I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

Don slapped him on the back. “How’s it going, buddy? You’re traipsing down the sidewalk like someone kicked your dog.”

“Just one of those days.” Lance didn’t want to stand there and talk about his shit life. “Listen, I’d love to catch up, but I have to keep going. Places to be and all that.” He didn’t have any plans for the rest of the day, other than feeling sorry for himself and sitting on the couch.

He wanted to get drunk, but couldn’t afford the booze.

“Hey, I understand. Until just recently I was a busy man myself. I’ll walk with you so we can catch up.” Don fell in beside him.

Lance fought the urge to sigh. All he wanted right then was to wallow in his misery. No one wants to run into old acquaintances when they’re down on their luck. That’s why people skip their high school reunions.

“Are you still contracting for the DoD?” Don walked with his chest out, arms relaxed at his sides.

“Nah. I’ve been bouncing around for a few years now. The market for guys like us is narrowing.”

Don bobbed his head. “I hear that. Who’s pulling your strings now?”

“No one.” Lance decided that he really didn’t give a shit whether he impressed Don or not. He just wanted to get away from him. “I just came from a job interview.”

“You don’t have a job? I thought you had places to go and all that?”

“Yeah, well—”

“I’m just fucking with you, man!”

Lance wanted to slap him. He pictured a perfect backhand landing flush. “Hilarious.”

“Believe me, I understand what it’s like to be down on your luck.”

The custom three-piece suit that Don wore said otherwise. Lance peeked at it as they walked. “That’s a nice suit you have there. Sears?”

Don laughed, long and deep. “Hugo Boss. Things have been going really well for me.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance couldn’t care less, but Don didn’t seem to be going away

anytime soon.

“Yup. Sold my business last year. Put quite a bit of coin in my pocket. Now I’m living the good life.”

Lance bit back a gag. “Yet you’re still wearing a tie. I thought the point of cashing in was so you didn’t have to do that kind of shit anymore.”

“The sweeter things in life come to those who dress nice. I’m looking to invest in a new startup now so I have to look presentable.”

“Good for you.”

“But hey, listen to me bragging. What kind of job are you looking for? Maybe I know of something.”

Lance finally let the sigh out. “Anything at this point. Since the downturn, I haven’t been able to find much of anything. Everyone wants to hire college kids.”

They stopped at an intersection, mixing in with a small crowd waiting for the crossing signal to change.

“That sucks, buddy. I’ll put a word in for you if I end up throwing some cash at this startup.”

Lance peered over at his old co-worker and saw a hint of a smirk. He thought back to their relationship all of those years ago, wondering if they’d ever been as chummy as Don was acting now. Their conversation was weird and stilted, like Don was forcing something.

“Well, at this point, I’ll mop floors if I have to. The bills are stacking up.”

The light changed and people stormed across the street, heading to their jobs or lunches or loved ones. Lance followed, jealous that someone, anyone, waited for them at their destination.

His life was shit and he knew it. He put in a lot of hard work over the years, yet he couldn’t seem to catch a break no matter what he did. One plus one equals him sucking at life. Even worse, he’d been feeling sorry for himself during every waking moment.

He was caught in a never-ending cycle of self-loathing.

Don cleared his throat. “How’s Liz?”

Christ, Lance thought.

If talking about his job situation stabbed him like a knife to the gut, then discussing Liz was akin to twisting it. He was surprised that Don even remembered her name. They hadn't spoken in more than a decade. The man must have a memory like a steel trap.

"She's leaving me," Lance said through gritted teeth.

"Oh man, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"How could you know?"

"Still. That sucks."

"Yeah."

Lance hoped the uncomfortable silence between them would make Don get the hint and go away. It didn't.

"Has she filed the paperwork yet?"

"What?" Lance stopped and turned to face Don, his eyes narrowing. "That's a bit inappropriate, isn't it? I mean—"

A woman stumbled past them, her skin ashy, spider veins running through her cheeks. Her eyes stared straight ahead, unfocused and vacant. Long blonde hair fell to her shoulders.

Lance and Don shared a confused glance.

"Ma'am?" Lance asked. "Are you OK?"

He knew how stupid the question sounded before it left his mouth, but it was all he could think to ask. This woman couldn't be further from OK. OK punched her in the face and skipped town quite a while ago.

"So hungry," she mumbled. Her toes dragged along the sidewalk, her steps short and labored. One of her shoes was missing. "So hungry."

"Can I call someone for you?" Lance took a step toward her.

"Maybe we should let the paramedics handle this." Don pulled his cell out and dialed 911. "Yeah, we have a woman walking down the sidewalk that needs some help. Ninth and Grant. She's mumbling to herself and looks like she hasn't seen the sun in a decade. No, she's not bleeding. Look, she's all kinds of fucked up. Send someone down here pronto."

She continued on, bumping into people, teetering on unsure ankles.

Lance followed her, wanting to make sure she didn't hurt herself, his

problems momentarily melting away. The condition of her skin stayed front and center in his mind, the varicose veins bothering him more than anything else did. What could make someone look so horrible?

The stench of soured dairy emanated from her pores.

Don jogged to catch up to him, dropping his phone into the pocket of his expensive suit. "Ambulance is on the way. They were being a major pain in the ass about it."

"What do you think is wrong with her?" Lance asked.

"Drugs, probably. What else makes you incoherent and turns your skin to shit?" Don frowned at the woman as they followed her. "Why exactly are we keeping tabs on her still?"

"Because I don't want her to get hurt."

"Oh, sure. Yeah, me too."

"Besides, she doesn't look like a drug addict to me."

"Lance, your powers of deduction suck. Look at her, buddy. She's high as a kite."

Lance pointed at the back of her head. "Check out her hair."

"What about it?"

"It's nice. She takes care of herself. Her jeans are designer and that is one huge ass diamond on her finger. This isn't some crackhead turning tricks for her next fix."

Don inspected her. "I take it back—you might be on to something here. So what are we looking at? A woman who caught a disease or something?"

"Dunno."

"Shouldn't we stay away from her then? What if she has the bird flu or mad cow?"

Lance recognized his opportunity. "Good idea. Why don't you hang back and I'll take care of this? You can make sure the ambulance finds us. It was nice catching up." He really hoped that Don would finally leave him in peace.

"Shit, buddy. I can't leave you alone with her. Besides, you never told me what happened with Liz."

Damn it.

She staggered sideways, brushing against a man eating a hotdog. The food fell from his hand, landing against his white shirt and green tie, ketchup and mustard staining everything.

“Goddamn it!” The man scowled at his shirt in disbelief. “What the hell are you doing, lady?” He turned on her, his mouth falling agape as he took in the cobweb of veins running through her face. “Jesus!”

“Just stay back!” Lance said as he walked up to the man.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“No idea, but I wouldn’t touch her if I were you.”

The man wiped at the condiments on his shirt. “Too late for that, bro.”

Lance and Don continued walking, staying five feet behind her. People gave her a wide berth now, wary of coming anywhere near the sickly woman. She seemed oblivious to everyone’s presence, careening along as if she were alone on the sidewalk.

A teenager with ear buds in, his head bobbing to music, jogged across the street, his eyes turned to look for traffic, and plowed right into her. They both fell to the ground, limbs sprawling across the concrete. An iPhone fell from the teen’s pocket, scraping along the harsh surface.

The kid’s head snapped around, lips curling in anger. “You stupid—”

He cut himself off when he saw her complexion, his rage shifting to fear. He scrambled to his feet, grabbing his cell and sprinting away, throwing a concerned glance over his shoulder.

The woman, now scratched and bleeding, worked her way back to her feet, muttering to herself about her hunger.

“She’s completely out of it, buddy,” Don said.

Lance wanted grab her arm and force her to stand still until the paramedics arrived, but he was afraid of catching whatever she had. Instead, he did his best to warn people away, shouting every few seconds at someone else who wasn’t paying attention.

They crossed half of a block when Don stopped, shaking his head. “I’m done. No way am I going to risk getting sick. She’s all messed up and we’re crazy if we keep following her.”

“I’ll take it from here,” Lance said, turning back. “It’s not like I have anything else to do today.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. Diseases scare the hell out of me.” Don’s eyes cut from Lance to the woman and back again. “I feel like a real shit leaving you.”

Lance looked him over and felt that his old co-worker was being sincere. He softened a little, wondering if he might have overreacted to Don when they first bumped into each other. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

“Don’t worry about it. Good luck with your investment or whatever.”

“Sorry for prying about Liz too. That was uncalled for.”

“Again, don’t—”

“Shit!” Don pointed over Lance’s shoulder, his face reddening.

“What?” Lance spun around and saw the woman stepping off the curb, teetering into the bustling street.

Don cursed but didn’t move.

Lance jumped forward, ten feet away, unsure if he would make it to the woman before a car flattened her like a pancake.

Horns blared.

People shouted.

She kept going, wandering blindly across the painted lines.

Lance ran around the back end of a parked car, swearing under his breath as he closed the distance.

A cab swerved around a stopped water truck, the driver slapping at the horn in impatience. The man was too busy glaring at the truck to see what lay ahead.

Lance saw it coming at the last second, having little time to react.

He reached the woman and shoved her as hard as he could, lifting her feet from the ground. He felt her frailness through her shirt in the split second before her body flew away from him.

There was no time to brace himself for the inevitable.

Pain registered for a moment before everything went dark.

Raucous laughter pulled Lance out of the fog.
His head pounded as he struggled to open heavy eyelids.
More chuckling.

Bright overhead lights hurt his eyes as they adjusted, shapes taking form around him. White paint covered everything except the television in the corner of the room and the pants and shoes elevated on his bed.

Friends played on the TV, the audience roaring every few seconds.

Lance followed the legs and groaned when he saw Don sitting beside him. He slouched in a seat beside the bed, his legs propped on Lance's sheets, a small bag of Cheetos resting in his lap. He laughed almost as much as the audience did.

One at a time, Lance wriggled his fingers and toes, making sure he felt every sensation.

"Thank God," he whispered.

"You're awake!" Don retracted his legs so quickly that the half-empty bag of Cheetos spilled on his fancy suit. "Damn it."

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"You've been in and out for a while. We spoke a couple of times too, but I'm guessing you don't remember that," Don said, brushing cheese powder from his chest. "Christ, what a mess."

Lance pushed himself to a seated position with a herculean effort. "I feel like

I was run over by a car.”

Don gaped at him. “You *were* run over, buddy.”

“I was being ironical.”

“Oh. Funny guy.”

“You’ve been here with me the entire time?”

“Yup. I was starting to get seriously bored too.”

Lance thought that his first impression of Don truly had been wrong. He definitely wasn’t the giant ass that he originally thought. The guy didn’t need to wait bedside for someone he hadn’t seen in over a decade.

“Thanks, Don. Really. I appreciate it.”

“It’s the least I could do. Honestly, I feel pretty guilty because I was just about to leave you there to deal with that woman alone.” The tie around Don’s neck was loosened, hanging a few inches below his collar, the top button of his shirt undone.

“What happened to the sick woman?”

“No idea.”

“Did she get hit by a car too?”

“Nope—you pushed her clear. Crazy ass kept on walking as if nothing happened.”

Lance moved to throw the sheet covering his torso off, but stopped when he felt the ache in his side. “Damn, my ribs are sore. Did they pick up the woman? Is she in the hospital?”

“I think so. I’ve been sitting here the whole time though, not checking on her.”

Lance wondered if he could find out what was wrong with her later. Doctors weren’t allowed to discuss patient’s information with other people, but he hoped he could do some sneaky eavesdropping. Even now, as pain reverberated up and down his body, he couldn’t help but speculate about her condition.

She looked like death walking around Pittsburgh.

Don glanced at his watch. Looked like a Rolex. “Well, buddy, I better be going.”

Fighting through the stiffness in his side, Lance swung his legs over the side

of the bed so he could face Don. He stuck out his hand. "Thanks, Don. Keep in touch, will ya?"

Don hesitated a moment before finishing the handshake. "You're welcome. Sorry again."

"It's no big deal. Stop apologizing for something that didn't even happen." Lance didn't understand why he felt so sorry over something of such low consequence.

"Well, I—"

"Hi, Lance."

Liz stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the bright lights of the hall. She stepped inside, her gait tense and stilted.

"What are you doing here?" Lance asked. "That came out harsh. I'm just surprised to see you."

"I'm still listed as your emergency contact."

"Oh." It had never occurred to Lance to change that. Going through a divorce was hard enough without dealing with little details like that. He raged at himself for not making the adjustment. Now he'd have to argue with her while saddled in bed with an achy body.

Don's head swiveled back and forth between the splitting couple. "Guess I should skedaddle. See ya, buddy." He walked past Liz and they shared a glance. "Nice seeing you, Liz."

"You too, Don." She stepped further into the room after Don cleared the doorway, dropping her purse into the chair. She wore jeans and a tank top that showed off her well-maintained body. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, rather than laying against her shoulders as usual. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got hit by a car."

Liz stared at him. "That's not funny."

"Well, excuse me for wanting to cut through the tension with a little joke."

"There's nothing to joke about."

Lance sighed. He could vaguely remember a time when she found him funny. It was one of the few personality traits he had that people found

endearing. He'd given up on humor somewhere between being lonely and depressed. Why it decided to make a comeback lately, he didn't know.

Just to piss her off probably.

This conversation felt like so many others they had over the past few years. Round and round they went. After a bout of condescension, Liz would move to anger and then shaming. Lance would then crack wise and blow her off, all while feeling terrible about himself.

"OK, fine. I hurt too much to argue right now."

"Care to tell me how you were hit by a car?" Liz crossed her arms over her chest. Lance knew right away that she'd already shut herself off to him. Crossed arms were her tell, always had been.

"Someone told me to play in traffic. People have been telling me that my whole life, so I figured why not try it just this once. Turns out it isn't so much fun."

"Why do you have to be such an asshole?"

"Why do you have to interrogate me after I just saved a woman's life? Or I at least saved her from the pain I'm in right now." Lance really didn't want to argue with her, but she had an uncanny ability to get his dander up. If she were a member of the X-Men, her power would be chapping his ass.

Liz glowered at him, not speaking for a while. A staring match commenced, like two children trying to see who would blink first. Lance always lost these and this time would be no exception.

"Are you finished?" Liz asked finally.

Lance stayed silent, his anger building. If something didn't change in the next few seconds, an all-out screaming match would commence.

"Good," she said. "Now, what do you mean you saved a woman's life?"

"A sick woman almost got ran over, so I jumped into the street and pushed her out of the way."

Her face softened as she took in what he said, frown easing, eyes rounding. "A sick woman?"

"Yeah. Delusional or drugged out—something like that. Doesn't matter anyway."

“If you say so.”

“Look, I can handle it from here on out. There’s no reason for you to hang around. Thanks for coming though. I really do appreciate it.”

Liz moved her purse from the chair to the floor and sat down, ignoring Lance’s invitation to leave. “How did the interview go?”

“Christ, Liz.” Lance eased back into the bed. “Why do you do this to me?”

“It went that well, huh?”

Lance’s mouth opened and closed several times as he tried to decide the best way to respond. His inability to hold a job over the past few years was a huge point of contention between them. The more he tried to find employment, the worse it seemed to go for him. And that only pissed off Liz even more.

She’d grown up much wealthier than Lance. Her father owned a construction company out of Philadelphia and her mother held a corporate job with the Eagles. Neither of her parents were enthusiastic about Lance seeing their daughter, and they almost went nuclear when he announced his intentions to propose.

They knew, even then, that Lance would never acquire the kind of lifestyle that Liz and her parents were accustomed to. The fight between the three of them the day of the wedding was brutal and the fallout remained. They saw her parents on the holidays and talked on the phone every once in a while, but an enormous emotional chasm lay between them.

When Lance lost his first job due to corporate downsizing, it planted the seeds of their marital downfall. He’d promised to take care of Liz financially and emotionally and he failed at both. Losing most of his confidence after a second layoff blunted their relationship, to say the least.

Though she’d remained patient with him through the turmoil of his career, Liz struggled with the new shape of their marriage. As much as Lance doubted himself nowadays, he knew that she had lost even more faith in him.

The shame that accompanied that feeling only worsened the downward spiral. She once saw him as an achiever and a hero for having paid his way through college, but now she looked at him like an anchor hanging around her neck. In all honesty, he couldn’t blame her for seeing things that way.

The never-ending cycle of joblessness and the accompanying emasculation put Lance in a funk that he forever struggled to climb out of.

Divorce proceedings started almost a year ago.

Lance couldn't prove it, but he was almost convinced that she'd been seeing someone else on the side for the better part of six months. Maybe longer. He just had that feeling sometimes when the phone rang, or if she stayed out late with friends.

"They're looking for programmers, not old hats like me. Same as everyone else." Lance ran his hands through his hair, grimacing at the lump he found on the crown of his head.

"I told you to go back to school or get a certification or something, but you never did listen to anything I said."

"Go back to school with what fucking money? We're broke, remember?"

A doctor jogged past the open door, a stethoscope bouncing against his chest.

"You're broke. I'm doing just fine." Liz's tone grew angrier by the second. Lance knew they'd be at DEFCON 1 within a minute or two.

"Using your father's money to buy food doesn't constitute doing just fine. Listen, I have a helluva headache right now. Can we save this for later?"

"Everything is always later with you."

He grunted. "Did the doctor's tell you about what happened to me? Is anything broke or punctured?"

She lifted her purse from the floor and stood up, putting the strap over her shoulder. "Just some scrapes and bruises. Nothing major considering what happened."

"Good. The last thing I need is a large medical bill." Lance's insurance lapsed several months ago and he wasn't sure how he would pay for the minor hospital stay he'd already had.

She turned to the door before stopping and looking back at him. "Please take me off any other lists that I might be on. Insurance, loans, whatever."

"I will."

"Bye, Lance."

"Hey, Liz? Thanks for coming. Really. I know you didn't have to."

She stood at the doorway, watching him for a moment, her eyes unforgiving.
“You’re welcome.”

Two more doctors ran by the door.

Shouts came from down the hall.

Lance sat up again, trying to see around Liz. “What’s going on out there?”

She stuck her head through the open doorway, peering to the left. “I’m not sure. Looks like there’s some kind of fight going on down there.”

Lance eased off the bed, feeling the cool floor on his bare feet. A shiver ran up his body, sending a wave of pain through his sore left side. He gritted his teeth and shuffled across the room, dragging an I.V. stand behind, careful not to touch Liz as he peeked over her shoulder.

A large group of people encircled an area by the nurse’s station, watching as several doctors struggled to get two screaming patients to calm down. Lance recognized one of the patients immediately—the sick woman from the street. Even as he stood more than fifty feet away, he could see that her situation had deteriorated even further.

“Jesus,” Lance said. “That’s the woman I pushed out of the street.”

“The blonde?”

“Yeah. She was more comatose then though. I couldn’t even get her to acknowledge me, let alone struggle like that.”

Three security guards ran past them, shouting for everyone to stay in their rooms. Lance watched as they pushed through the spectators and grabbed hold of the woman, finally pulling her to the ground. Another man, his appearance shockingly similar to the ill woman, also fought against the doctors and guards.

“I don’t like the look of this.” Lance grabbed the I.V. and tore it out of his arm, tossing it back into the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting the hell out of here,” Lance said as he searched around the bed for his clothing, not finding them.

“You aren’t making any sense. Maybe you should lie back down.” Liz stood in the doorway, feet spread, blocking the way out. “Some sleep might clear your head.”

“I’m fine.”

“If you were fine, you wouldn’t be trying to leave the hospital in your condition.”

“Listen to me, there is something really wrong with that woman. You should see her close up. Veins are visible all over her face and her hair and skin are... thin.”

“She’s obviously a drug addict—they all look like shit.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think she has some kind of disease or flu or something. I mean, look at the other guy down there. He has it too. If this is infectious, then I sure as hell don’t want to be around here any more than I have to.”

Liz leaned back and looked down the hallway again. “Infectious?”

Lance knew he had her full attention then. Liz was one of those people who hated being sick so much that she would pretend to be fine, even when she had food poisoning. She refused to go anywhere near someone she thought might have a cold. It was one of those personality quirks that Lance found endearing during the early stages of their relationship and annoying later on.

“Well, if two of them have it, then yeah, I’d say it’s contagious.” Lance didn’t know if anything he said was true or not, but he didn’t want to risk it. If there was even the remotest chance he could catch what that woman had, he needed to get the hell out of Dodge. Sadly, it wasn’t just the thought of looking like her that worried him—he knew he couldn’t handle the medical costs that would come with it.

Liz stood at the door, frowning. “I don’t know. I still think you should probably stay here until your doctor clears you.”

Shrieks flooded the hallway.

“Screw that,” Lance said, still looking around the room. “Damn it! Where are my clothes?”

“Oh, I forgot. The nurse said they had to throw them away because they were torn and bloody.”

“Shit.” Lance didn’t want to leave the hospital with his ass hanging out of his gown, but he didn’t see much of a choice. “Where are you parked?”

“Two blocks down. The garage was full.”

Lance grimaced. Not only did he have to walk through the hospital with his backside exposed, he’d have to navigate down two blocks. “The *entire* parking garage is full? That doesn’t sound good.”

“I didn’t really think about it at the time,” Liz said. “You’re right though—that sounds like there are a whole lot of people in here.”

More security guards rushed by the open door, huffing as they hustled their out-of-shape bodies as fast as they could. The ruckus from down the hall grew louder. The guards shouted for everyone to get away—that everything was under control.

“We need to leave. Now.” Lance moved to the door.

“You’re going to walk around in that?” Liz gestured to his gown. “Don’t you at least want your wallet first?”

“They can mail it to me. Look, I hate to ask you to do me any more favors, but I could really use a ride home. I promise not to argue with you at all.”

“Well, I’m supposed to meet Erin at the gym in about thirty—”

“That’s fine. I can walk home from there.” Lance stepped into the hallway before she could make a counter offer. He turned right, heading in the opposite direction of the crowd, glancing over his shoulder.

The two sickly people were gone, along with most of the doctors. A half dozen guards remained, trying to herd people back to their rooms. A janitor worked his way through the group, pushing a bucket and mop toward a red puddle in the floor.

Reaching the end of the hall, Lance and Liz turned right. Two more guards argued with a man at the opposite end of the corridor, their angry words incomprehensible from so far away. They stood in front of the elevators, hands on hips, blocking the way out. Out of order signs leaned against the reflective doors.

“Damn,” Lance said. “Do you know where the stairs are?”

Liz stopped and nodded her head in the other direction. “That way. It’s kind of weird that *all* the elevators are out of order, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

A glowing exit sign protruded above the door at the other end of the hall. Lance picked up his pace, feeling as if he needed to get out of there as fast as he could.

Something was going on and he didn't want to wait around to find out what.

They made it down two flights of stairs when they ran into Don, his perfectly tailored suit disheveled and dirty.

"Don? Thought you were leaving?" Lance noticed that Don's face had flushed.

"I've been trying, but they have the place on lockdown. Every exit is blocked off." He gave Liz an uneasy look before turning his attention to Lance. "I've been running around, trying to sneak out, but they've got all of their bases covered."

"Who has the place locked down?" Liz asked. "Why?"

"The police are all over the place out there. Dozens of 'em. And no one will tell me why—they just keep saying that I need to stay inside for my own safety. I got pissed off and tried to push my way through but they swarmed on me and threw me into the lobby."

Lance swallowed a swell of panic forming in his throat. "They aren't letting anyone leave at all?"

"No. They aren't even letting anyone else come in unless they're seriously injured."

Liz shared a brief look with Lance.

"What?" Don asked.

"Remember how the woman in the street looked? The sick one that I pushed out of the way?"

"Yeah."

"She's not the only one in here that looks like that. We just saw another guy that has the same thing."

“Sir, I need you to stay back.” The police officer held a hand up. “I understand that you want to leave, but you have to stay here for just a little while longer.”

Lance took another step forward, drawing an uneasy glare from the short, stocky officer. “*Why* do we need to stay here?”

“I’m not going to ask you to stay back again, sir.” He kept his hand up in a warding off gesture, his other wrapped around the end of what appeared to be a Taser.

“What are you going to do? Zap all of us with that thing?”

“Believe me, I don’t want to.” The cop leaned closer to Lance so no one around them could hear. “None of us know why we aren’t allowed to let anyone leave. The order came down about thirty minutes ago and we haven’t heard anything since.”

“So we’re being held hostage, but no one can tell us why?” Lance shook his head. “That makes zero sense.”

“I understand, honestly. I want to keep you here even less than you want to be here. This sucks for everybody, but I really need you to relax and go back to your room. Maybe get something to eat in the cafeteria—I don’t care.” The dark-haired officer stepped back into the line of cops that stood in front of the main entrance of the hospital.

Lance turned to Liz and Don, shrugging his shoulders. “Guess we’re stuck

here.”

“Now what?” Liz asked.

The lobby area of the hospital overflowed with angry people, most cursing at the officers and making threatening calls to the police station. Many paced around, hands clenching as they tried to think of a way to get out. Others used sob stories to try to sway the officers into letting them leave.

None of it worked.

Two lanky men made a break for it, charging the line of uniformed men, shouting about their constitutional rights. The officers made short work of them. They pinned the men to the ground, cuffing and immobilizing them. Sliding them away from the doors, the officers sat the men against a glass wall, silently refuting the men’s angry shouts.

Twin children, red-haired and fair-skinned, cried beside their parents, clutching at each other.

“I want to know what’s going on here. If this has to do with the woman upstairs, then we need to find out why they’re keeping us inside.”

Don stuffed his hands in his pockets. “This is such bullshit. As if I have the time to sit around here and do nothing.”

“I’m sorry about this, Don. You came here because my dumbass jumped out in traffic. It’s my fault you’re dealing with this.”

“Nah, this isn’t your fault, buddy. Some asshole in city hall is making the biggest mistake of his life.”

Liz watched the people meandering around the lobby, arguing with the cops. “We should get out of here before things get out of hand.” She turned back to Lance. “I think the officer is right—let’s get some food from the cafeteria. When these people get hungry, the hospital is probably going to have trouble feeding all of them. We’d better get something now.”

“Yeah, OK.” Lance tried not to dwell on the chill in his feet coming from the cold floor, or the draft in his gown. He’d tied the back shut, but the fabric was thin. “Maybe we can find me some clothes too. My ass would really appreciate it.”

The cafeteria was surprisingly quiet. Only a handful of workers stood behind

the counters, chattering about the events surrounding them. A few families were scattered around, sitting at tables, eyes glued to the televisions mounted along the walls.

CNN played on all of the TVs, but the volume was too low to hear.

Lance stepped up to the counter and waved at a short, curly-haired woman. She wore a hairnet and apron, looking none too pleased about her current situation.

“Miss? Do you have any idea what’s going on? We just tried to leave, but they have the doors blocked with cops.”

“No idea. My shift ended twenty minutes ago and they wouldn’t let me leave either. It’s total crap. My manager says I should just shut up and claim overtime, so here I am.” She gestured to the assortment of sandwiches, vegetables, soups, and bottled drinks. “You want anything?”

They ordered some food that Don had to pay for because Lance didn’t have a wallet. The idea of Liz paying for anything made Lance want to laugh. Sitting at a table by the left wall of the cafeteria, they stared up at the newscast, waiting for some kind of acknowledgement of their predicament.

“They have to talk about what’s going on here, right?” Liz asked after several minutes of uncomfortable silence.

Lance realized as they sat there, that he hadn’t spent this much argument-free time with his wife in the past two years combined. Just the sight of him usually set Liz off. Having a common problem, other than each other, gave them something else to focus on.

Don must have felt the tension between them, though it was less than usual, as he ate his sandwich and stared at his tray of food.

“I don’t see how they could ignore this, that’s for certain.” Lance read the summary of news scrolling on the screen underneath the talking head, chewing on his lip as he waited for something relevant to appear.

Lance was about to give up when he saw a headline about a hospital being quarantined. He looked over at the woman behind the counter. “Can we get some sound in here? I want to hear what’s going on.”

The volume increased, a woman’s voice piping through in-ceiling speakers.

“...an odd report from New York City. The Presbyterian Hospital is quarantined. Officials aren’t saying why these drastic steps have been taken, but local residents have stated that a severe flu outbreak is the cause. Family members of those inside the hospital have said that no one is being allowed in or out of the hospital for non-emergency reasons.”

A live video feed from outside of the emergency entrance filled the screen. Dozens of police cars parked haphazardly in the area, blocking access. *“As you can see, there is a large contingent of police cars surrounding the building. We’ll report more on this as soon as we get it. In other news, the string of practical jokers throwing smoke grenades into public parks, concerts, and even sporting events has reached yet another city...”*

Lance rubbed his temples, squeezing his eyes shut. “We might be in deep shit here.”

“Did she say that was happening in New York?” Liz’s voice went up an octave, her cheeks flushing. “As in, this is happening in more than one city? Not just Pittsburgh?”

“That’s exactly what she said. It sounded like they don’t even know the same thing is going on here yet.”

“Christ,” Don said, dropping the rest of his half-eaten sandwich to his plate. “This is bad.”

“Since when do hospitals get closed down over the flu?” Liz asked. “Is this some kind of epidemic?” She rambled on, her words coming faster and faster.

Lance reached out and put his hand on her forearm, needing her to remain calm. Both Liz and Don stared at the hand, prompting Lance to retract it, mumbling an apology.

“Let’s not panic yet. Maybe we can get a doctor to spill the beans.” Lance stood and walked over to a garbage can, depositing his trash. “We should see if they have some of those little paper masks that people wear so they don’t get sick.”

He didn’t believe those things provided any worthwhile defense against germs, but he needed her to relax.

Liz’s hands shook as she tried to pick up her tray. “I can’t believe this is

happening.” She turned on Lance, her mouth contorting in anger. “This is your goddamn fault!”

“Mine?” Lance gaped at her, not understanding why she’d become furious with him so suddenly. He knew how frightened she was, but this was too irrational, even for her.

“If you would have just taken my name off your stupid contact list, then I wouldn’t even be here! Don wouldn’t be here either! But no, you just had to follow some crazy woman into the street, didn’t you?”

Lance struggled with a response. Part of him wanted to fight back, pointing out her selfishness, but he knew it wouldn’t work. Nothing he could say would make a bit of difference. She was beyond the point where he could talk reasonably with her and nothing short of getting out of the hospital could change that.

“I’m sorry I got you into this.” He left the cafeteria and went back upstairs, doing his best to maintain his composure. When she got like that, he often wondered how they’d managed to stay married for so long.

Stubbornness was his guess. That and stupidity.

His floor had quieted down, but people still moped around, whispering about what happened earlier. Lance padded his way down to the nurses’ station, his feet starting to hurt from the lack of shoes.

The nurses appeared just as harried as everyone else did.

“Hello,” Lance said, resting his arms against the counter.

No one responded. They continued shuffling papers and talking into phones.

“Uh, *hello?*”

The woman sitting directly opposite of him huffed loudly, dropping a pen from her hand. “What?”

Her aggression took him off guard. She was a stout woman of fifty with a beehive haircut that made her look like everyone’s favorite aunt. He hadn’t expected her to snap at him.

“Sorry to disturb you, but I have a few—”

She cut him off with a dismissive wave. “Yinz need to let us work. We have a million problems to deal with right now and we don’t have time to waste

answering the same questions over and over.”

Christ, she's a yinzer, Lance thought.

Pittsburgh natives have an odd dialect that Lance was fortunate enough to have never adopted. They often mispronounced words and letters. Sometimes they just made stuff up, like yinz, gobs, and snookies.

“I’m sorry if my being held hostage is an inconvenience to you.” He read her nametag. “Pam, I just want to know what’s going on.”

Pam let out a long, slow sigh. “You aren’t allowed to leave because you might be sick.”

“But I’m not sick. I was hit by a car.”

“You might be infected and just aren’t showing any signs yet.”

Lance forgot all about the growing pain in his feet. “Infected? Infected with *what?*”

“Pam, I’ll take this from here.” A doctor walked around the station, giving the nurse a small smile. “How can I help you, Mr....?”

“York. Lance York.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. York?” He was tall and slender, thinning hair struggling to cover his pale scalp. Wire-rim glasses sat at the edge of his nose, which he peered over at Lance.

“I want to know what the hell is going on.”

“Sorry, Mr. York, but we’re under strict orders to stay quiet.” He gently took hold of Lance’s elbow and led him away from the nurses.

“Strict orders? From who?”

“I’m not supposed to say that either.”

“This is bullshit, you know that? I’m an American and I have rights.” Lance didn’t know what those rights were, but he heard people say that on television all the time.

The doctor watched him for a moment. His eyes darted around the small waiting area by the station. “Look, I agree with you. This is complete bullshit, but they’ve already threatened to take away my medical license if I don’t cooperate.”

“Who is threatening you? How can they do that?”

“The CDC.”

Lance recoiled. “The Center for Disease Control? Fuck me.”

“That’s right. There’s something big going on and they’re trying to keep a lid on it. Afraid of panic and all that.”

“Doctor Brown?” Nurse Pam stood behind the counter. “You’re needed.”

“I’ll be right there.” He turned back to Lance, whispering. “Honestly, I don’t even know that much right now, so I couldn’t tell you a whole lot even if I wanted to.”

“Is it the blonde woman with the veins through her face?”

Dr. Brown looked around nervously before giving him a curt nod.

“I saw her down on the street. She was stumbling around, talking to herself. She looked like hell. I’m the guy that saved her from getting hit by a car.”

The doctor nodded again but said nothing.

“What’s wrong with her?” Lance asked.

“Doctor Brown. You’re needed right *now*.” Pam’s hands were on her hips.

“Coming,” Brown said. “Mr. York, listen—”

“Lance.”

“Lance. Listen, I have several patients to attend to—”

“I saw someone else that looked like her. Is this thing contagious?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“Are there more than just two of them who are sick?”

“So far we have twenty people with similar symptoms.”

“Doctor Brown!” Pam stormed around the counter, heading their way.

“Come find me later,” Brown said. “I might know more. To hell with the CDC—people have a right to know.” He turned and met the nurse halfway. They whispered furiously at each other, looking over their shoulders at Lance before disappearing around a corner.

Lance stood in the hallway, mind reeling.

Twenty people.

They were in deeper shit than he could have imagined.

He slowly walked back to his room, unsure of what to do next. The severity of what was happening in the hospital started to sink in as he walked through the

door, finding Don and Liz waiting for him.

They were talking as he entered and stopped abruptly, turning their attention to him.

“So, I just talked to a doctor.” Lance sat on the bed, grateful to get off his feet.

“And?” Liz asked.

“And we’re in deep shit. He says they have twenty people in here with the same symptoms as that woman. Apparently, the CDC is involved now.”

“The CDC?” Don dropped his face into his hands. “Fuck me.”

“That’s what I said. They’re threatening the doctors too—telling them not to say anything to anyone.”

“But he told you all of this?” Liz got up and paced around, her hands fidgeting by her sides.

“I guess he’s disgruntled. He told me to find him later on because he might know more. Right now, they don’t know what it is.”

“It’s obviously contagious though, right? If twenty people have it, then it’s getting around,” Liz said.

“Yeah.” Lance grabbed the remote control for the television off a little stand by the bed and pressed the power button. “That’s the assumption I’m making.”

He flipped through the channels until he found a news station and turned the volume up.

“...still aren’t commenting on the cause for the quarantines, but we know there are at least four U.S. cities with hospitals on lockdown...”

Lance’s stomach sank like it had a ball of lead in it. Whatever they were dealing with had spread and it did so at an alarming rate. Four cities were affected already—how many more would suffer the same fate by the end of the day?

“We need to get out of here,” Liz said, tremors playing hell on her inflection. “This can’t be happening.”

“How do you expect us to do that?” Don asked, his head still in his hands. “The hospital is surrounded and apparently the CDC is involved now. We’re screwed.”

“Maybe this is the safest place for us.” Lance didn’t believe what he said, but he hoped it would keep Liz from blowing a gasket.

“What do you mean?” Mascara ran down her cheeks in thin lines, staining her clear skin.

“If they figure out how to treat this thing, we’ll be first in line. Any precautions they figure out will be communicated to us first. Yes, we’re closer to it than I’d like to be, but we’ll know what’s going on, and how to treat it, before anyone else.”

“What good does that do us if we’re dead?” Her pacing resumed.

Lance shrugged his shoulders, giving up. He knew from experience that the only way she’d calm down now was on her own. The more he tried to keep her relaxed, the more wound up she became.

Don fished a cell phone from his pocket and manipulated the touch screen.

“Calling your wife?” Lance asked.

“Me?” Don glanced at Liz, an odd expression on his face. “No way—never been married.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve got an idea. Maybe I can move some money around and get a special favor from someone. See if we can’t get out of here.”

“Are you going to bribe someone?” Liz went back to pacing.

“You think that’ll work?” Lance asked.

“Don’t know till you try.” Don walked into the hallway, yapping into the phone, asking for a man named Frank.

“I should call my parents and let them know we’re all right.” Liz grabbed her cell from her purse and sat on the edge of a chair, her feet tapping on the floor.

For years, Lance told Liz that she needed to smoke marijuana or get a Xanax prescription, something to calm her ever-present fidgeting when she was nervous. He wanted to force feed her a pill now.

“Dad? Yeah, I’m OK. We’re stuck in the hospital though. Lance, of course.” She scowled at him as she filled her father in on the situation.

Lance mumbled to himself and leaned back in the bed, ignoring her drone. Over the past two or three years, he often overheard her talking on the phone to one of her parents, spilling the details on how much of a loser he’d become. He

could only imagine how vindicated her father felt over the situation.

That man loved to hate Lance. He told everyone he could that his son-in-law would implode one day and that Liz would come running home. He was right, of course.

And it seriously pissed Lance off.

“Frank? Frank!” Don stood in the doorway, staring at the screen of his phone. “What the hell? No signal? That’s impossible. The damn thing just had four bars.”

Lance instinctively reached for his left pocket, intent on grabbing his phone, before remembering that his clothes were destroyed and belongings had gone AWOL.

Liz yammered on, fear fueling her wagging tongue.

“Liz, are you sure he’s still on the phone with you?”

“Don’t interrupt me. Sorry, Dad, Lance is... hello?” She pulled the cell from her ear. “Damn it!” After several swipes and button presses, she threw the phone back into her bag. “Nothing.”

“Could they block cell phone signals?” Don asked.

“They? The CDC?” Lance’s attention went back to the TV, hoping to find more answers there.

“Yeah, the government.”

“Probably. Or the towers could be jammed from everyone panicking and trying to make calls.”

“...more of the smoke bomb pranks have continued throughout the day, despite the dire situations many cities are now facing. We would hope that whatever group has decided to play these tricks would understand that now is not the time for...”

Lance tuned the broadcaster out, not caring about a couple of knuckleheads playing tricks on people. He turned to the window to his right and looked at the darkening sky above. The night was approaching.

“Maybe we should get some sleep,” he said. “If we’re lucky, we’ll get more answers in the—”

The rumble of massive engines filled the streets outside the window.

Lance grimaced as he slid from the bed and walked over, peering down. Humvees and armored vehicles pulled in front of the hospital, cutting off access to the surrounding streets. Armed service men and women in full camouflage hopped out and trotted into the building.

“Holy shit.”

“What?” Liz walked up beside him, following his gaze. “Oh my god.”

Don stayed in his seat. “Now what’s going on?”

Lance placed his forehead against the glass and closed his eyes. “The military just arrived.”

“...Total is now at twenty-eight in twelve different states. There is still no official story on what’s causing the quarantines, but unnamed sources have told us that the CDC is heavily involved and that more cities are likely to be affected in the near future...”

Lance hurried down the hallway, padding past the nurses’ station without looking at any of the busy bodies inside. He wanted to get past them unnoticed if possible. He needed to find Doctor Brown ASAP and figure out what was going on.

He’d told Liz and Don to stay in the room and wait for him to come back, but they wouldn’t listen. They followed a dozen yards behind him, not wanting to appear as if they were together, hoping they would draw less attention that way.

“Sir? You can’t go back there!” Pam pushed herself out of her seat, pointing at Lance as he slipped by.

With the military arriving, Lance figured he didn’t have much time to get answers. He expected everyone to be locked in their rooms in short order, so he pushed on, ignoring the nurse that gave chase.

An ear-piercing shriek filled the hallway, stopping everyone in their tracks. Lance made eye contact with another patient in the hall, a portly woman of sixty or seventy, and saw the unbridled panic in her. He tried to force a smile but found that he couldn’t do it. He was as scared as she was.

Another siren song echoed across the hard surfaces of the hospital.

A scream of agony followed it.

Lance broke into a run, heading toward the sounds of conflict.

Liz hollered his name from somewhere behind him, but he ignored her. He had to know what they were dealing with.

Around the next bend, he stopped outside of a glass-walled observation room, his mouth agape at what he witnessed.

A dozen doctors surrounded the woman from the street.

Her condition had deteriorated dramatically in the few hours since Lance had seen her.

Her eyes were milky and shriveled, like white raisins in their sockets. The veins in her face stood out from her deathly pale, sunken skin.

Her lower jaw hung low, yawning so wide it neared dislocation.

She shrieked again, the shrillness of it stabbing at Lance's ears despite the wall of glass between them.

A doctor staggered toward the door, clutching at his left wrist as he stared at the place where his pinkie and ring fingers should have been. Blood covered his white coat, dripping to the floor as he cried out. The color drained from his face as he pushed into the hallway, his stumps wriggling as if the fingers were still attached.

Bile stung the back of Lance's throat as the doctor stumbled past him, moaning in pain and shock. He turned his attention back to the sick woman to see her pounce on an orderly, her teeth snapping at his hands as he tried to ward her off.

Doctor Brown stepped forward, grabbing her around the shoulders, giving the others time to react. They grabbed her legs and lifted her from the ground, fighting against her wriggling body. She snapped at them, dead eyes lolling in their sockets.

It took five of them to get her strapped to a bed, arms and legs bound by straps with buckles. Cords stuck out in her neck. Her muscles bulged as she tried to break free.

Lance watched the events, unable to speak or react. Seeing a woman who

looked sick earlier, now appearing closer to a corpse in less than a day, scared the shit out of him. If he contracted whatever she had, he would rather jump off the top of the hospital than have his eyes shrivel.

The woman writhed on the bed, struggling with her restraints, shrieking like a banshee.

“Sir, you can’t be here!”

Nurse Pam grabbed Lance’s bicep and tried to pull him away from the window. He jerked his arm free, never taking his eyes from the ravaged woman on the bed.

“What’s happening to her?” Lance whispered. His voice sounded distant, as if it came from someone else.

“If you don’t leave right now, I’m going to have you arrested!”

Lance ignored her. “Is this going to happen to us?”

Doctor Brown spotted him through the glass. He quickly walked to the hallway and shooed the nurse away. “Mr. York, now isn’t a good time.”

“Now is the only time,” Lance said, peeling his eyes away from the mad woman. “The military just arrived, for Christ’s sake!”

“They what?” The doc’s forehead wrinkled. “No one told us anything about that.”

“A whole shit ton of them just pulled up in fucking tanks. I want to know what’s going on, right now.”

Brown rubbed the top of his balding head. “We haven’t figured out much since we last spoke.”

“Well, how about you start with what’s wrong with her eyes?”

“I,” Brown scanned around, making sure no one could hear, “don’t know exactly. Her body is doing things that shouldn’t be possible. Her metabolism is through the roof. We’re pumping calories into her at a ludicrous pace, but her body is burning them off faster than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“Doc, she’s acting like an animal. An animal with rabies.”

He nodded. “Her higher brain function is failing at an alarming rate. We still don’t know what’s causing it. She’s lost all ability to speak.”

“So that’s it? That’s all you guys have figured out? What’s the CDC saying?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot. They’re listening more than informing.”

Lance’s shoulders slumped. He kept hoping he would wake up from this nightmare soon.

“What should I do?” he asked.

“Pray.”

“You want me to pray? The military is storming the castle, a woman is turning into a goddamn zombie, and you want me to pray? Do you know this is happening all over the country?”

Brown’s head rocked back. “What? Not just in Pittsburgh?”

“They haven’t told you that either? Hell, we saw it on the news. There are twenty plus hospitals where this exact same thing is happening.”

More of the doctors filed out of the room, animated chatter passing back and forth. None of them paid any attention to Brown or Lance. They had bags under their eyes, their hair messy.

“This is going to shitsville, Doc. We need to get out of here.”

“I don’t disagree, but—”

The echoes of dozens of boots clomping on the floor came from down the hall. Soldiers marched toward them. Some stopped by rooms, barking orders at patients and nurses. Others kept coming, M16s held in front of them.

They all wore gas masks. A few adorned full-body suits.

“Everyone back to your rooms,” shouted the lead soldier. “For your own safety, we need you to cooperate fully. Everything is fine—these are precautionary measures only.”

Lance didn’t buy that for a second. Precautions consisted of going outside when a fire alarm went off, or closing schools if it snowed too much. Precautions should never involve armed men occupying a building meant to care for the sick and wounded.

Doctor Brown leaned forward, whispering to Lance. “I’ll stop by your room and give you updates whenever I can.”

Lance gave him an almost imperceptible nod. “Thanks.”

The soldier in front, whose nametag identified him as Reynolds, stopped in front of Lance. His blue eyes were visible through the plastic shield of the gas

mask. The gold leaf on his chest signified he was a major or colonel—Lance couldn't remember which.

"Sir, I need you to return to your room right now. Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

"But—"

"Eifort!" The officer turned to the soldier behind him. "Escort this man to his room and stand guard at his door. One of the nurses has informed me that he's been taking some liberties around the floor." He locked his steely eyes on Lance. "Don't let me see you again."

The soldier, Eifort, stepped forward. She stood a little shorter than Lance, and had her brown hair pulled into a ponytail. The mask obscured most of her face. The three peaked stripes that made her insignia didn't mean anything to him.

At that moment, he wished he knew more about the military than what he'd seen in movies.

"Let's go." She gestured with the business end of her rifle.

Lance considered arguing about his rights again, but the look in the officer's eyes kept him silent. He had a better chance of escaping the hospital if he wasn't hogtied to his bed.

He walked in front of the female soldier, heading back to his room. More soldiers were stationed in the hall, one standing by every three or four doorways. People cast wary glances as Lance walked by.

Some cried.

"You're scaring all of these people," Lance said over his shoulder.

The woman told him to keep moving.

Pam scowled at Lance as they passed the nurses' station. Lance gave her a smile, hoping it would piss her off. The way she gripped her pencil told him that it worked.

They arrived back at his room a moment later. Liz and Don stood by the window, staring down at the street.

"What's your name?" the soldier asked as he walked inside.

"Lance. What's yours?"

“You can call me Staff Sergeant Eifort.”

“Well, how about you tell me what’s—”

She closed the door in his face.

He thought he saw her cheeks rise a bit and wondered if she’d smiled while cutting him off. Probably.

Liz and Don left the window.

“Damn nurses stopped us before we could follow you,” Don said. “Didn’t mean to leave you hanging.”

“You don’t want to see what’s going on over there anyway. That woman is all kinds of screwed up.”

Liz’s eyes were red-rimmed. “Is she going to die?”

“I hope so.” Lance winced at his sore feet as he shuffled to the bed.

“You *what*?” Liz frowned at him.

“Believe me, she’s in bad shape. It would be torture if she lived. Her fucking eyes are shriveled in their sockets. They looked like they might fall out of her head at any moment. Did you hear that shrieking? That was her.”

“Oh god.” Liz flopped into one of the seats, fresh tears streaming.

“She attacked a doctor too. I think she bit his fingers off.”

They contemplated their situation in silence for a while, watching the reporters on CNN speculate about what was happening around the country. Fatigue started to take Lance when he saw a different headline flash across the screen. A new, older gentleman sat behind a desk, reading from a sheet of paper someone just handed him.

“We’ve just received word that all flights in and out of the country have been grounded. All border crossings are now closed. Ships are ordered to return to their docks. All outside access to the United States is shut off. Make no mistake, my friends, these are extraordinary measures and they all point to the severity of the situation. Add this to the mobilization of the National Guard, and it’s clear that our country is in grave danger. Again, all flights...”

The accompanying video showed overflowing airports and landed planes. It switched to a grocery store being looted by an angry mob. Shopping carts and fists flew around the building as police cars arrived and more violence broke out.

The camera switched to the empty shelves of a Walgreens, all the medical supplies stolen.

Don reclined in his chair, his head resting against the back cushion. “They’re shutting down the country. This is even worse than I thought.”

“This is like one of those shitty zombie movies you used to make me watch,” Liz said.

Lance didn’t know what to say to that. She was right.

And this movie was just beginning.

Tapping woke Lance from a shallow sleep.

Rays of sunlight stung his eyes as he rolled onto his back, making him shield his face with his hand. The fog of sleep slowly dissipated as he looked around the room.

Liz and Don slept in the chairs, curled into tight balls to stay warm.

He couldn't remember falling asleep. They were watching the news last night when the exhaustion overcame him and then here he was. He'd slept through the night without waking up once. Judging from how far the sun was from the horizon, Lance guessed he'd slept for at least ten hours. How much of that was his body healing from being hit by a car, and how much was stress, he didn't know.

The stiffness in his muscles and fullness in his bladder confirmed how long he'd been asleep. He sat up, grunting at the ache in his left arm and ribs. He hurt worse this morning than he had yesterday. Some painkillers would do him wonders right then.

Snow played on the television. Every channel had nothing but static as he flipped through a few.

More rapid tapping came, one after another.

Lance froze, listening, wondering if someone might be at the door, trying to get their attention. The sounds came faster then, louder.

Drifting in the window from the street.

Ignoring the pins and needles in his left foot, Lance slid off the bed and sneaked over to the window, not wanting to wake Liz and Don up.

Three bodies lay in the street, pools of blood expanding underneath them.

Soldiers stood in a line by the entrance of the hospital, rifles raised, shouting orders.

A man ran toward them, shrieking like the woman down the hall. He only wore pants, no shoes or shirt, his body vascular and ashy. His musculature was visible through his skin, bulging in a mad tapestry of flesh.

They shot him down when he reached the bodies. He flopped like a fish, wounded, but not dead, clawing his way forward.

One of the soldiers fired again and the man's head snapped back before plopping to the asphalt.

"Jesus." Lance bit into his knuckle, his mind not wanting to accept what he saw. "They're killing civilians."

"Hmm?" Liz stretched out behind him, uncurling her legs. "What's that sound?"

"Gunfire. Gunfire and death."

"What?" She jumped to her feet, crossing the room in three long strides.

Lance pointed at the street below. "They were running at the soldiers and they shot them."

"No way! They can't do that!"

"They are. I think those people are infected with whatever this thing is. Look at that guy's back. See the veins and muscles? He barely looks human."

Liz squinted. "This can't be happening. Why would they just kill them and not subdue them? These are sick people, not criminals!"

Lance agreed with her. He couldn't believe that he just witnessed a person get shot down like that. If he was being honest with himself, he was even more shocked at how distorted the victim's body had become.

He resembled a monster more than a man.

Things were moving too fast. Every few hours something new and horrible happened.

Don clopped over to them, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What's going

on? Why are you guys shitting your pants?”

“They’re killing people in the street,” Lance said, still staring at the dead man. “Things are going to hell in a hand basket.”

They watched as the soldiers moved the bodies to the sidewalk and reloaded their weapons. Another armored vehicle arrived with a man stationed behind a mounted gun on top.

They were gearing up for a war.

“Guys, we need to get out of here ASAP,” Don finally said.

“How?” Lance turned to him. “There are armed guards and military personnel outside the door. A colonel or a major already threatened me.”

“Why?” Liz asked.

“Said I was a troublemaker or taking liberties or something like that. Seemed like an asshole.”

The door to the room opened and Doctor Brown stepped through.

“Good morning,” he said.

Lance looked him over, shocked at how fatigued the man appeared. Dark circles hung under droopy eyes. Half of his shirt was tucked in—the other half dangling over his belt. Bloodstains dotted his coat.

“Liz, Don, this is Doctor Brown.” Lance eased back onto his bed, glad to be off his feet again. It was amazing how years of office work had sissified his legs. Every time he took some pressure off them, he felt orgasmic.

Don stepped forward, offering a hand. “Doc Brown? Really?”

“Please save the Back to the Future jokes for another time. I’m too tired to pretend that you’re the first person to make the connection.” He gave Don’s hand a feeble, exhausted shake before turning his attention to Liz. “Are you Lance’s wife?”

Liz hesitated. “Yes.”

Her response surprised Lance. He’d expected an emphatic ‘hell no’.

“I wish I could say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but under these circumstances, it’s not.” The doc stepped away from the door, lowering his voice. “I only have a few minutes, but I promised to keep you in the loop, so here I am.”

“You look tired, Doc,” Lance said.

“We don’t have time to sleep, unfortunately. We’re trying to get ahead of this thing, but it’s not looking good.”

“No shit, Doc. They’re shooting people out there.”

“They’re shooting people in here too.” Brown shook his head. “I can’t even begin to explain the things I’ve seen. Two of the people under our care were killed this morning by military personnel.”

Liz gasped. “How can they do this? *Why* are they doing this?”

“The men were shot in self-defense. They attacked several of our orderlies and broke loose. The soldiers shot them before they could hurt anyone else.”

“How many people are infected now?” Lance asked.

“I don’t know. We have at least fifty cases in the hospital, but we’ve had more people coming in all night.”

Don said, “And three more were just killed outside.”

“If people out there are infected and not seeking medical attention, then we have no idea how widespread this is.”

“Our television doesn’t have any signal so we aren’t up on the latest. Has the government said anything?” Lance had chills running up his spine. He was starting to wonder if this was it.

The end of it all.

“They cut off the communication systems inside of the hospital. Something about quelling any panic, which sounds like a load of crap to me. I only know what the CDC is telling us, which isn’t much. They’ve declared martial law though—no one is allowed out on the streets unless for medical emergencies. All interstate travel is shut down too. At this point, they’re following some preplanned protocol to contain an outbreak. We’re in full-blown crisis mode.”

Cutting off the phones and television signals to the hospital felt like a too little, too late situation to Lance. If the people outside the building suffered from the same things as those in here, then what was the point in taking out their communications? He knew the government was slow and inefficient, but this was ridiculous.

“And what about the disease? Is it contagious?”

Doc Brown stepped further inside. “Incredibly contagious. The CDC thinks it is airborne, which would basically decimate the population, but I don’t believe that. We have two doctors and a dozen orderlies that are showing symptoms and all of them have come in contact with the patient’s blood or saliva.”

“Saliva? Are you telling me we’re dealing with zombies here?” Don asked. “Bullshit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not. These people are very much alive. But their bodies are changing at an incredible rate. The woman who came in yesterday barely resembles—”

Three raps on the door cut him off.

“Time’s up, Doctor Brown,” Eifort said from the hallway.

“What time?” Lance asked.

“They’re limiting our time with each patient. Listen to me very carefully—do not kiss each other or touch anyone who is bleeding. You don’t want to be exposed to any bodily fluids other than your own. We don’t have a test to tell who’s infected or not. Only time is giving us any indicator. If this thing gets inside you, symptoms will appear within hours.”

The door opened and Eifort poked her head inside. “Now, Doc. The major will be up my ass if you don’t get out here.”

Brown went to the door. “Be careful. I’ll stop by later if I can.”

Lance wanted to know more, but the doc looked too exhausted to keep going much longer. He figured it would be better to let the man see patients who actually needed help and not just information.

To his surprise, Brown paused by the door for a moment, before motioning for him to follow. Lance jumped off the bed, his sore feet and ribs regretting the sudden movement, and fell in line behind him.

“This patient needs to have further testing done. I have to take him down the hall for a moment.”

“Bullshit,” Eifort said. “You know the rules.”

“If this man dies because we couldn’t—”

“He looks fine to me.”

Gunfire exploded outside. Heavy and louder than last time, the walls

vibrating from concussive blasts.

Lance ran back to the window, his pain temporarily forgotten.

The soldier operating the mounted gun fired relentlessly, spraying bullets down an alley to his right. He paused, swiveling around, and let loose another burst into the street.

Lance craned his neck, pressing his face against the window, following the soldier's line of sight.

A dozen people ran forward with jerky gaits. Their bodies appeared bloated, like they retained too much water. They hissed and shrieked, their wails filling the area.

The machine gun cut them down.

Civilians cried out and ran inside a café across the street. Two uniformed men dragged the dead bodies to the sidewalk and stacked them on top of each other.

Major Reynolds strode into the street, barking orders. He was the only person down there who appeared to keep his cool. Men ran around him, following his directions, setting up railings, sawhorses, and police tape to keep people at bay.

One of the soldiers by the door lost his breakfast as a dilapidated body on a gurney was carried past him.

Lance turned around. "Eifort, what's going on out there? Are they telling you anything? It's like a fucking warzone."

Her eyes were as big as saucers, plainly visible through her gasmask. "I'm under orders not to—"

"Goddamn it! They're killing people in the streets! You need to help us get out of here! You realize that we're locked inside this damned building with at least fifty infected people? Do you expect us to just wait here to die?"

"You're surrounded by armed soldiers who are here to protect you," she said without conviction. "This is the safest place you could be."

"Tell that to the people piled three deep on the sidewalk." Lance pointed out the window. "They're executing the sick. If the order to take us out comes down, will you shoot us too?"

She stared at him for a while, her fingers tapping on the stock of her rifle.
“What do you want?”

Glass shattered somewhere down the hall.

A man cried out, screaming like a wounded animal.

“Stay here, I’ll come back in a minute.” Eifort slammed the door shut, taking Brown with her.

More shouting came from the streets below. Lance looked down, watching as a few soldiers coiled cables around their arms, packing them in crates. They loaded up the canvas-covered back of a truck. Others followed suit, putting supplies away, rather than taking them out as they had the day before.

Lance waited a few seconds before going to the door, putting his ear against the wood. The man in the hall stopped screaming, but other people shouted things that Lance couldn’t make out. He opened the door a crack, seeing a few patients across the hall doing the same.

“What are we going to do?” Liz asked. She stood behind Don, peering over his shoulder.

Even at a time like this, Lance hated that she would rather hide behind a man she hadn’t seen in over a decade than her own husband.

“We’re getting the hell out of here.” Lance pulled the door all the way open and looked both ways. None of the guards remained in the hallway. A radio squawked from somewhere off to the right, but he couldn’t quite make out the orders coming through.

“Maybe we’re safer here,” Don said. “We *are* surrounded by people with guns.”

“People with guns who are holding us hostage in a hospital. I’d rather fend for myself on the outside, than be trapped in here. Besides, I’m not so sure they’re going to be here to protect us much longer. They’re packing up the trucks outside right now. What happens if we wake up tomorrow and they’re gone? Will it be too late to navigate the streets? It already looks like a scene from Mad Max out there.”

Liz and Don exchanged a long look.

“Fine. Let’s go,” Don said. He handed Liz her purse and grabbed his jacket

off the back of the chair.

Lance stepped through the door in time to see a group of soldiers run past the end of the hall, rifles at the ready. He spun around and went the other direction, heading toward the nurses' station, hoping it would be empty.

It was. They continued past it, moving quickly.

A door opened on their right and a man poked his head into the hallway. "What's going on?"

Lance shrugged, raising a finger to his lips.

The glass observation room waited ahead. It was dark inside, with only a dim lamp in the corner. Lance peered in as he went by, seeing the sick woman still strapped to the gurney.

Someone had placed a divider in the room, separating the lamp from her rolling bed. Extra straps ran across her chest and thighs, keeping her from making all but the slightest of movements. Lance stopped and stared at her, his mind racing at the horror inside the room.

Liz bumped into his back. "What are you doing?"

She followed his gaze and gasped, raising a hand to her mouth.

"My god," Don said. "Is that the woman we saw in the street?"

"That's her."

"She doesn't even look human," Liz whispered. A tear spilled down her cheek.

The woman's frame had expanded, her muscles engorged like a fitness model. Veins bulged throughout her mostly nude body. The bone structure in her face protruded, her jaw much more pronounced than it had been before. Her chest rose and fell like a panting dog.

Hollow, unseeing eye sockets stared at nothing.

She writhed against the restraints, hissing and snapping at the ones across her chest.

"Hey!" A soldier stood at the other end of the hall, pointing at them.

"Run!" Lance took off, his feet sliding on the linoleum as he rounded another corner.

"What are we going to do?" Liz wheezed beside him.

“No idea!”

Another shriek came from a corridor to their right. One of the sick smashed through a door, breaking it in half. The man, enormously muscled and vascular, slid across the floor, jagged pieces of wood puncturing his gray skin.

He hissed, shrinking away from the light fixture above him, holding a long-fingered hand above his face.

Lance accelerated, running as fast as his aching feet would allow.

Don huffed behind him, swearing under his breath.

Soldier’s boots echoed through the hallways.

Rifles barked.

A stairwell sat at the end of the hall, unguarded.

Lance threw his shoulder into the door, popping it open. He stumbled forward, nearly falling down the stairs before he grabbed the handrail.

“This is complete madness!” Don rushed past him, taking the steps two at a time.

Liz cried as she ran, her back heaving with each sob. Lance grabbed her arm and helped her down the stairs. They only made it down one flight when they heard the door above them kick open and boots attack the steps. Lots of boots.

The stairwell rumbled like an entire platoon chased after them.

Lance eased the next door open, rushing Don and Liz through, praying the hinges wouldn’t squeak. He gently pulled it closed just as he saw the boots rounding the bend between flights.

Don didn’t wait to see if it worked—he took off down another corridor, his expensive shoes sliding on the polished floor. Liz leaned against a wall, shaking her head, tears flying from her cheeks.

“I can’t do this!”

Lance grabbed her face in his hands, and lifted her chin. “Yes, you can. You have to.”

“It’s too much. I can’t handle it!”

“If you could handle my bullshit for years, then you can make it until we get out of here.”

The corner of her mouth curled slightly. “You are a pain in the ass.”

“Come on.” He grabbed her arm at the elbow and gently pulled her along. “I think this floor has access to the parking garage.”

Don stopped at the end of the hall, staring down at a puddle on the floor.

They ran up beside him, looking at the same spot, tasting copper in the air.
Blood.

A crimson smear trailed away from the puddle, streaking down the hallway and into an open door. The light in the hallway above the smear was smashed in, as if something slammed into it with great force

Don whispered, “I don’t think we want to go that way.”

“No shit.”

Lance went the other direction, fighting the curiosity that urged him to see what was waiting in that room. He followed exit signs that led them down the next hallway.

He slid to a stop in another lobby, standing across from three soldiers posted in front of the crosswalk to the parking garage.

Their rifles were already pointed in his direction when he rounded the corner.

“Freeze!” one of them shouted.

Lance raised his hands as Don and Liz caught up. He looked back toward the hallway to his left, wondering if he could make it there before they shot him. He could still see the trail of blood, though it was fifty yards away.

“What are you doing out of your rooms?”

“Those things are escaping!” Lance considered making a break for it, but he feared Liz and Don wouldn’t be fast enough to follow. “We’re getting the hell out of here! I would suggest you do the same.”

“Shut up! You aren’t—”

One of the inhuman shrieks cut the soldier off.

Lance peered down the hall again.

An arm reached through the door of the room with the blood streaks, hidden in shadow from the broken light above it. The knuckles smacked against the floor, forearm muscles flaring.

Thunder pounded in Lance’s ears as his heart kicked into overdrive.

A head appeared, mostly bald and gray, eyes gone. The body followed, bent

over at the waist. The creature walked on all fours, its musculature straining inside of thinned skin. Blood dripped from long, sharp teeth.

Lance realized that he thought of the sick person as an *it* instead of a *man*.

“Holy shit.” Lance watched as it lumbered forward, sniffing at the air.

“What?” Don craned his neck to see around Lance. “Fuck me!”

Liz screamed when she saw it and sprinted toward the soldiers. “One of them is right there!”

Lance flinched, waiting for a hail of bullets to turn him into Swiss cheese.

“Stop! Lady, stay right there!”

“Fuck you! There’s a goddamn monster chasing us!” Liz ran to the right of the shocked soldiers, crouching behind a beige couch. “Shoot it!”

Lance watched the deformed human in the hallway. He didn’t understand how a body could mutate so quickly. He was far removed from his college biology classes, but he knew that what stood before him should have been impossible.

The whole thing felt like a science fiction novel.

It sniffed the ground, breaths so forceful that the blood on the floor spread under the pressure. Its shoulders jerked up, head cocking to the side.

Its mouth distended as it shrieked again.

Pain stabbed at Lance’s ears and he had to cup them to block out the sound.

The creature sprang forward, its torso lifting as it ran on its hind legs, its knuckles a foot from the ground.

Orders from the soldiers were nothing more than background noise as Lance shoved Don into the lobby.

“Go!”

They ran to the couch, kneeling beside Liz, breaths ragged, panic interjecting into every thought.

Lance stared at the flimsy couch and prayed that the soldiers were good shots. Fabric and particleboard weren’t going to save them from the horror coming down the hallway.

It came for them.

A freight train of rage and hunger.

It burst into the lobby, too fast to make the turn, and skidded into the wall, its pursuit barely slowing.

The soldiers unloaded in its direction, fingers pumping the triggers of their rifles, spraying bullets in wild arcs. They cried out in panic, years of training forgotten in a flash of terror.

The mutated man jumped away from the wall, landing on all fours, and charged forward.

Bullets chipped the floor and walls, fragments of construction churning to dust in the air.

They hit everything but their intended target.

It lunged at them, maw distending.

The soldiers' guns clicked empty.

The creature plowed into the first man, its meat hooks for hands snapping onto his shoulders. It tore at his uniform as they fell to the ground, the beast landing on top. Layers of camouflage and flesh shredded in a blur of green and crimson.

The man screamed as it bit down on his neck, tearing muscle and sinew. The second soldier, taller and thicker, reared back and swung the stock of his M16, connecting with the back of its head.

It fell sideways, landing on its hands and knees, head snapping around.

“No, wait!” The soldier took a half step back before it pounced on him. His body turned to an oozing, limp pile in seconds.

The third soldier jammed another magazine home, screaming wildly as he lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

He never got a shot off. It clawed at his legs, gouging wide canyons in his quads. He fell to the ground, his finger jerking the trigger in spasms, punching holes in the ceiling.

It bit into his neck as it had the first man, gnawing at and drinking from his carotid artery.

Lance stared into the dying man’s eyes from behind the couch. Don and Liz ducked behind the furniture, arms wrapped around their heads. Liz clapped a hand over her mouth as a loud sob escaped her.

It kept drinking, not hearing her cries.

Lance watched as it fed on the three men, moving back and forth between the bodies. It took a bite out of one before going to the next, as if it was trying to decide which to feast upon first.

The sight stretched Lance’s mind to its limit. People weren’t meant to see such things. His stomach twisted, wanting to spill its contents. He struggled to keep his emotions in check, knowing that his survival depended on staying as calm as possible.

Burnt gunpowder stung at Lance’s eyes as he slowly lowered himself behind the couch, kneeling in front of Liz. She looked at him from watery, red eyes. He pointed at his chest and then at the other side of the couch, needing her to understand what he was about to do.

They couldn’t get out of the lobby alive—not with that thing right there. It was fast and strong, taking out three armed soldiers at the same time. They had no hope of outrunning it.

Their only chance was the loaded M16 still clutched in the dead man’s hand. Lance hadn’t fired a gun since he was a teenager, and had never even held an assault rifle, but he didn’t see any other choice. That weapon was the key to their survival. Without it, they would be the next course.

Liz cocked her head at his pantomime.

He went through it again, this time mimicking a gun with his hand.

Her eyes grew large and she mouthed 'no' at him, grabbing his wrist. He nodded his head, pulling his arm away. They were out of options.

He peered around the edge of the couch. *It* worked on the abdomen of the furthest soldier.

Lance felt his gorge rise again and had to pause, holding a fist to his mouth. Now wasn't the time to puke—that would come later. After he regained his composure, he inched into the open, carefully planting each foot to maintain silence.

His adrenaline spiked, his system running all out. The sights and smells of the bodies assaulted his senses, threatening his already thinned grip on sanity.

The creature's jaw stopped working. Its ear, elongated and wider than a normal human's, twitched.

Lance froze, holding his breath, sweat stinging his eyes.

Its head cocked to the side, perforated nose sniffing.

Lance waited. His head swam from lack of oxygen, his lungs wanting to burst. He didn't dare move, despite the creature not having eyes, for fear it could sense him somehow.

It continued testing the air and Lance couldn't take it anymore. The air burst from his lungs as he lunged for the gun.

He stretched out, his fingers touching the barrel of the rifle as the beast reacted.

It leapt in the air, clearing five or six feet in the blink of an eye. Its banshee wail smothered the sound of Lance bellowing incoherently.

The dead soldier's hand still clutched the trigger guard. Lance yanked it free, focusing on swinging the rifle around, refusing to look at the death flying through the air at him.

There was no time to aim—he slammed the stock into his hip and yanked on the trigger. The concussive blows of the three-round burst knocked him backward, the end of the barrel angling toward the ceiling.

It flew at him, arms spread out, snarling and wailing.

The bullets punctured its chest and neck, peppering it in red splotches.

Lance grunted as it landed on him, its torso oozing, limbs twitching. He squeezed the trigger again, three more bullets punching through, instinct taking over his actions.

Its jaws clenched and relaxed twice more before it went still. The holes in its chest whistled as it exhaled its last breath.

After staring at the ceiling for several seconds, Lance fought to push it off him, but found its weight too much. “Need a little help here.” His voice quavered.

Concentrating on one task at a time helped him remain calm. Get free. Check for wounds. Make sure everyone is OK. To stand back and think about the implications of what just happened would have broken him.

Don’s head poked out from behind the couch, his eyes wide. “Is it dead?”

“I think so. It’s kind of crushing me though.”

“Are you sure it’s not playing possum?” Don took a tentative step out.

Lance’s hands shook as the adrenaline dumped from his body. His mind finally began to process the stupidity of what he’d just done, even as he fought to purge the thoughts. He’d killed a diseased monster that had been a man two days ago, watched as it consumed soldiers as if they were a three-course meal.

He closed his eyes and tried to clear his thoughts. “If it’s playing possum, then we’re all fucked.”

Don inched over, tiptoeing as if he was afraid of waking it up.

“It’s hard to breathe under here,” Lance said. “Hurry up.”

It reeked too. The smell reminded him of old meat left in the refrigerator too long.

They counted to three and shoved the muscular carcass to the side. Don dry heaved as he touched the slimy skin and recoiled, wiping his hands on his pricey jacket. “Oh god.”

Liz took cautious steps over to them as Lance got back to his feet. She stared down at the dead body. Her eyes blinked slowly, as if she expected the thing to disappear each time she opened them again.

More shots echoed overhead as a gunfight raged on the floor above.

“The hospital is FUBAR.” Lance pawed at the blood staining his shirt, the doctor’s admonition about staying away from the bodily fluids of the infected hitting home. “If we can get through the parking garage, we might be able to get to Liz’s car.”

Neither Liz nor Don responded. Don put a hand on Liz’s shoulder. “Are you OK?”

“That’s a stupid question. Look at this! How could anyone be OK at a time like this?”

Lance watched them, hating that another man could comfort his wife better than he could. “Is anyone listening to me?”

“I hear you,” Don said, though he continued to look at Liz. “But I want to make sure Liz is still with us.” He stepped closer to her.

Suspicion settled in the pit of Lance’s stomach. Was Don making a pass at his wife, right in front of him? At a time like this? There was a dead monster on the floor.

“Just get me out of here.” Liz continued to stare at the diseased man. “And what is FUBAR?”

“Fucked up beyond all recognition.” Lance grabbed an extra ammunition magazine from one of the soldier’s bodies, gritting his teeth, pretending he couldn’t see the vacant stare in the dead man’s eyes. The idea that he would steal bullets from a corpse would have been asinine only yesterday. Now it was just the next logical step in survival.

He handed the mag to Don because his hospital gown wasn’t exactly utilitarian. “Stay close and keep quiet.”

They stepped over the bodies and moved to the row of glass doors that led to the garage. The automatic sensors didn’t work, so they pried them open. Lance stood between the doors, keeping them from closing, as Don and Liz ducked under his arm and stepped through.

Frightened screams came from behind them. Lance held his position, squinting through the lobby, waiting for movement of some kind.

“What are you doing?” Don asked.

“Someone’s screaming back there.”

“I hear them, but what are *you* doing? You said it yourself—we need to get out of here.”

Lance bit back a snarky comment. “You wouldn’t want me to leave you here, so shut up for a second.”

They listened, every breath that escaped them thunderous in the silence.

An infant cried out.

Lance turned back to Don, handing over the rifle. “Here. I’ll meet you guys on the first floor, by the exit. Don’t let any of the soldiers see you. I can’t tell if they’re on our side or not.”

Don looked at the gun like it might bite him. “I don’t know how to use this thing.”

“You see the barrel with the hole in it? That’s the dangerous end. Point and pull the trigger. Be judicious with your shots, or you’ll blow through all of your ammo.”

“What are you doing?” Liz asked. “Please tell me you aren’t going back in there.”

“I am. Just meet me down by the exit.”

“Lance Arthur York, you will *not*—”

Lance stepped backward into the lobby, letting the doors slide shut, cutting her off. Her mouth continued to work on the other side of the glass, but her words were muffled and unintelligible. Lance didn’t even try to hide the grin that spread across his face.

She didn’t use his full name often, saving it for when she needed to give him a massive raft of shit. The last thing he wanted to hear just then was a lecture. He gave them a wave and pointed into the overpass beyond, mouthing ‘go’.

After grabbing another rifle from the floor, and a magazine from the partially devoured soldier, Lance plodded his way across the lobby, summoning what little courage he could. His body was on sensory overload, the violence and mutation surrounding him assaulting his mind like a night terror.

The baby wailed again as he approached the intersection of the hallways. A woman tried to hush the child, the cries muffling as if by hand or pacifier.

More gunfire rang out overhead.

Lance flattened against the wall and peered around the corner. The hallway was empty, save the blood on the floor.

What the hell am I doing? I'm no hero. Hell, I can't even hold a job.

The crying stopped as he moved into the hall, crouching low, staying close to the right side. He glanced in the first room, seeing nothing, and continued on.

"Hello?" he whispered.

No one answered.

The next room was also empty, the bed knocked on its side, sheets strewn across the floor.

Where did all the soldiers go?

He crossed to the other side of the hall, stepping carefully so his bare feet wouldn't slap at the floor. The light in the third room was turned off. Lance stood in the doorway for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness within.

He started to move on when smothered sounds came from inside the darkened area. A couch on the other side of the room sat in front of the corner, a large gap behind it. He stepped inside, rifle raised, goose bumps prickling out on his arms, fear spiking.

The sound came again, like someone struggling to breathe.

Unable to force himself to go any further, Lance stopped by the bed. "Is someone in here? Behind the couch? I came to help."

A woman's face inched up from behind the cushions, her brown hair disheveled and knotty. She peered at Lance from swollen, red, fearful eyes. "Who are you?"

"Just someone trying to get the hell out of the hospital."

"Why do you have a machine gun?"

He looked at the weapon in his hands. "I took it off one of the soldiers down the hall."

"You killed him?"

"No, he was already dead."

"One of those things got him?"

Lance nodded. "Yeah." He gestured for her to come out. "I'll take you to the parking garage—I have friends waiting out there for me."

She watched him for several seconds, appraising him. "Promise you won't hurt us?"

"If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it already. What's your name?"

"Ashlee."

"What's the baby's name?"

"Theodore." She stood up then, a bundle of blankets held in her arms. Her hand covered the child's mouth, his face contorted in anger.

"Let's get Teddy out of here. You can't let him cry though, OK? If those things hear us..."

Lance walked to the couch and pulled the end of it away from the wall, letting Ashlee slink around it. She wore a t-shirt and torn jeans. Her light brown hair rested on her shoulders, sweat wetting the roots. Lance couldn't tell if she was even old enough to drink.

The baby had no hair and large, pissed off eyes. Judging from the few extra pounds that Ashlee still carried around her hips and midsection, Theodore was little more than a newborn.

She caught him looking down at her child and turned him away.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Lance said. "How old is he?"

"Five weeks."

Shit.

The idea of sneaking through the halls with such a young baby made Lance's blood pressure spike.

Pounding boots approached the door. Lance ducked behind the bed, pulling at Ashlee's shoulder. She dropped down as a group of soldiers stormed by the door, not slowing to look in the room as they ran past.

One of them said something about an evacuation.

Lance wiped sweat from his eyes and stood up slowly, waiting until he couldn't hear the men anymore. He went back to the door and made sure it was clear before motioning for her to follow him.

He kept his thoughts to himself, not wanting to worry Ashlee any more than necessary, but his concern over the idea of an evacuation gnawed at him. If they were evacuating, why weren't they checking the rooms for patients?

They went back to the lobby, flinching every time a gun went off somewhere nearby. Sobs hitched Ashlee's shoulders. Teddy cried against his mother's hand.

"Close your eyes," Lance said as they walked past the reception desk.

"What? Why?"

"There are dead bodies by the doorway. You don't want to see them, trust me."

She started to argue with him when she caught a glimpse of the dead creature on the floor. Her eyes slammed shut, face scrunched. "Don't let me fall."

"I won't." He guided them around the deceased in a wide arc, avoiding congealing blood on the floor. The smell had worsened in the few minutes he was gone and the entire room reeked of spoiled meat.

He angled her toward the doors, warning her not to turn around while he pried the exit open again. "Go through."

After she went by, Lance cast one last glimpse into the hospital, hoping he was making the right decision.

Death held sway in the building—but what waited for them outside?

They found Don and Liz hiding behind a large F150.

Her head rested on his shoulder, their fingers interlocked. Slow, deep breaths came from them as they relaxed together, whispering quietly back and forth, eyes closed. The rifle sat on Don's lap.

Lance stared at them for several seconds, swallowing the ball of rage forming in his gut, before nudging Liz's shoe with his foot.

"Time to move."

She started, eyes popping open, free hand grabbing Don's bicep. "What?"

"We can't stay here." Lance nodded to their newest companions. "This is Ashlee and Teddy."

Don stood, stretching his arms, acting as if nothing had happened. "You brought a baby? How the hell are we going to get out of here with a baby?"

Lance snapped his fingers. "You're right, Don. I should have left the infant back there."

They locked eyes, neither turning away, before Ashlee spoke up. "We won't be a burden, I promise. I can keep up."

"What do you think, Don? Should we just lay the baby on the concrete right here? Wish it good luck?" Lance kept picturing Don and Liz holding hands and felt his anger building. He had more important things to worry about, like staying alive, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been had somehow.

"Fuck you, Lance."

Lance stepped forward, glaring up at Don, thinking about throwing a punch, when the glass doors separating the garage from the hospital shattered.

“Get behind the truck!” Lance grabbed Ashlee by the arm and pulled her along. They ducked by the headlights, peering over the hood.

A half dozen soldiers ran through the broken doors. They sprinted down the ramp, heading straight for the back of the F150. Two of them were covered in blood and gore, but they moved well, so Lance guessed it wasn’t theirs.

Doctor Brown followed them, lagging behind with Eifort in tow. His white coat was maroon.

Eifort’s gas mask was gone, exposing her soft features. She appeared younger than Lance had initially pegged her for—maybe thirty.

The first group of soldiers banked right, following the exit signs that led to a stairwell.

“Doc,” Lance whispered as Brown jogged by the truck. “Over here.”

Eifort lifted her weapon, swinging it around until she locked on Lance’s face. “You!”

“Come on! Hurry up!” Doctor Brown waved them out. He kept looking over his shoulder as he waited for them. “They might be following us.”

Lance stepped on a sharp rock as he followed Ashlee and had to bite his lip to keep from shouting obscenities. He needed to find a pair of shoes.

And some pants.

“Where did you get those guns?” Eifort asked as she lowered her own.

“From the soldiers just inside the door there. One of those... things killed them.”

“We should talk about this outside where it’ll be safer,” Brown said.

“Lead the way, Doc.” Lance gave Don one last glare before falling in line behind the doctor. He watched for rocks as they walked, his feet and shins sore.

They approached the stairwell when one of the shrieks came from somewhere behind them. The echoes of the parking garage made it impossible to judge the distance it came from. Lance didn’t turn to look for it, running to the door instead, holding it open and waving everyone through. He slammed the door shut and followed behind, finger caressing the trigger of his rifle.

“Hurry!”

Ashlee took her hand from the baby’s mouth to hold onto the railing. His cries were immediate and shrill—a homing beacon for the nightmare that followed them.

They piled through the door on the first floor as something crashed into the stairwell above. Claws clattered on concrete, unseen, but nerve-wracking as they came down the stairs.

Dozens of guns pointed at Lance as he ducked under the wooden gate arms blocking the entrance to the parking garage.

“Halt!”

Lance stopped, glancing over his shoulder, knowing they didn’t have much time before it would be on them.

“Drop your weapons!”

Lance and Don tossed their guns to the ground. The glare from the sunlight outside made it difficult to see who they were talking to.

Eifort stepped forward. “They’re with me!”

“Civilians are not authorized to leave the hospital. Go back inside, now!”

“The hospital is overrun with—”

The door to the stairwell burst open.

It cried out as it stormed forward in unbridled bloodlust, teeth and claws grinding.

Lance grabbed Ashlee by the shoulders and spun her around, dragging her off to the side behind a concrete pillar. “Get down!”

The others scattered, running to safety as the garage filled with the deafening thunder of war. The hard surfaces of the building gave the gunfire a cavernous echo.

Lance saw the creature coming, closing the distance between them in three leaps. It was a woman, or used to be, its body distorted like the others. Its eyeless face expressed nothing but ravenous desire.

It was cut down before it reached them, dropping to the ground in a hail of bullets. Exit wounds showered the pay station and gate.

“Cease fire! *Cease fire!*”

The gunshots waned, then halted. The air reeked of gunpowder. Lance wiped black soot from his eyes.

Theodore cried harder than ever, his tiny cheeks an angry red.

Lance peered around the pillar, making sure no one would shoot them when they stepped out. “We’re coming out! Don’t shoot!”

They walked slowly through the broad entrance, squinting against the lingering smoke. Uniformed men ran around the street, shouting and pointing, occasionally firing down streets and alleys.

Civilians shuffled in and out of small businesses lining the sidewalk, ushered away from the military if they got too close. News helicopters hovered overhead.

The pandemonium in the middle of a major U.S. city startled Lance more than the news reports they’d seen earlier. Chaos ruled the day.

Dozens of armored vehicles littered the road. Plastic sheeting and large, white hoses were being rolled up and packed away. Tables folded and slid into the back of trucks. Cables wound and extension cords collected.

Lance knew a cut and run when he saw one.

A large group of men waited on the sidewalk, weapons aimed at Lance and his companions.

Major Reynolds strode down the sidewalk. “Let them through. It’s not like the infection hasn’t spread all over the goddamn place anyway.”

The soldiers by the entrance stood aside, but kept their rifles trained at the garage.

Eifort stood at attention, saluting the major. “Sir, we were completely—”

“I’m well aware, Staff Sergeant.” He gave her a quick salute back. “Are any of you infected?”

“No, sir.”

Doctor Brown’s face contorted. “You know what happened in there? Why didn’t you send help? Those things tore half of my staff apart!”

“As you can see, we’re a little busy out here, trying to survive.” Reynolds nodded to a café across the street. “See that building? It’s full of body bags—used body bags.”

“What’s going on with the evacuation?” Lance stepped forward. “I overhead

some men talking about leaving. Are you abandoning the city? You just got here!”

More shouting from down the street got the major’s attention. “The events out here are far beyond anything happening inside that hospital. We can’t control the infection from this location. The city is lost.” He walked away without saying anything else. Soldiers and officers called out to him from all directions as he crossed the street, as if he was a celebrity at a movie premiere.

“Well, that told us absolutely nothing,” Don grumbled. “What the hell does that even mean? The city is lost?”

“Eifort,” a uniformed man said. He stood by a table with electronic equipment covering it, wrapping Ethernet cabling around his arm. He was roughly the same size as Lance, but a bit taller and leaner. “What happened in there?”

The staff sergeant saluted. “Captain Jackson, it went south in a hurry. We lost almost everyone. Riggs, Sanchez, White... they were... eaten. Sir.” A sheen covered her eyes as she spoke, but her voice never wavered.

“Eaten by other human beings—Christ. And the rest of the patients in the hospital?”

“Most have barricaded themselves inside of their rooms.”

“That’s probably for the best.” The captain turned to Ashlee and looked over her baby. “There’s a medical tent down the street if you or the child need anything. You should get over there soon though; they’re closing up shop as we speak.” He pointed to a FedEx store down the way. “All other civilians are either being sent home, or ushered in there if they need to contact someone—your choice.”

“Why didn’t you send help?” Doc Brown asked again. “There are doctors and nurses in there who can help you. Everyone with a gun suddenly turned tail and ran out of the goddamn building!”

“We were going to when a small wave of those things moved on us. We’re getting calls from all over the city about people being attacked in their apartments and in the streets. Some decisions had to be made, and one of them was to temporarily abandon the hospital.”

“But the CDC told us—”

“The CDC was in charge when our primary concern was fighting a virus. Now we’re being physically attacked. New orders came down an hour ago—we’re leaving the city.”

Lance started to ask another question, but was cut short by a new round of gunfire. They ducked down by a Humvee, Lance popping his head up to see what happened.

Theodore cried on.

“Make up your mind—go home or try and follow us out of here, but do it now.” The captain pulled Eifort aside and gave her some orders that Lance couldn’t hear before he turned back to everyone else. “We aren’t allowed to take any non-medical civilians with us, but that doesn’t mean you can’t follow.”

“Where are you going?” Lance asked. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The city, which operated normally just yesterday, was about to be abandoned by anyone of authority.

“We’re falling back to Heinz Field.” The captain looked around, making sure no one was close enough to overhear him. “All of the bridges and major highways leading out of the city will be blown or heavily guarded. Testing centers will be setup at two or three points around the city where you will be observed for any symptoms of whatever this is. If they clear you, then you’ll be allowed to leave. Heinz Field will have the biggest space, so I would go there if I was you.”

“You’re going to cut off the city?” Lance stared at the man, his mind racing. Things continued going from bad to worse. Now they were telling him to go to the Pittsburgh Steelers’ stadium and hope for the best.

What the hell kind of plan was that?

“Right. The disease is found primarily in major cities. The countryside is fairly safe, for now.”

“So all of us are going to be kept over here, while you guys are safe on the other side? You’ll have guns and tanks and we’ll have the sick and dying. And that sounds like an ethical way to protect the country?” Lance’s face felt hot, the agony in his feet abating.

Liz touched Lance's arm. "Take it easy."

"Fuck that. These guys locked us in a hospital with those things, and now they're going to lock us in the city. This is bullshit. Hell, they're pulling out and going home without even telling everyone in there," he shouted as he pointed to the hospital. "All of those people don't even realize that you've left them!"

The captain stared at him, stone-faced and unresponsive.

A helicopter whooped overhead, buzzing over the street before disappearing between buildings. A myriad of contrails crisscrossed the sky as jets blazed back and forth over the city. Lance took it all in before turning back to the captain.

"You can't leave us here. We'll die."

The captain remained steadfast. "We're doing everything we can. There isn't a playbook for something like this. Get to the stadium. It's your best chance." He gave Eifort a nod before heading back to his table and packing up the rest of the electrical gear.

Lance thought about confronting him again, but didn't see the point. It would accomplish nothing, except increasing his chances of being shot. Besides, the man had a point—who knew what to do at a time like this? He turned to Eifort instead.

"Listen to me. You can't—"

"There's nothing I can do," she interrupted. "I have my orders just like everyone else."

"At least take Ashlee and the baby. How do you expect her to navigate through this madness to the stadium with a child in her arms? She'll be a walking target."

Ashlee's eyes grew wide. "You think so?"

Eifort shook her head. "But—"

Lance turned on Doctor Brown. "They're taking you with them, right? They said they're taking medical personnel."

"That's what it sounded like, but I'm much too tired to be of any good now." Brown's shoulders sagged, his cheeks sunken in. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Tell them that she is your wife and that this is your child." Lance put his

hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"But I'm not married."

Lance struggled to maintain his patience. "They don't know that. It's a simple lie and they're too preoccupied to look into it."

Brown examined the baby and Ashlee for a moment before nodding. "She's a bit young, but I'll tell them she's my second wife. My trophy wife if you will." He paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, but do you have an actual husband?"

"No, it's just me and Theodore here. His douche bag of a father split town as soon as he found out I was pregnant." Her ample chest puffed out a bit as she spoke, her pride in raising the baby alone evident.

"Good for you," Brown said, extending a hand. "My name is Emmett, in case they ask."

Lance laughed in spite of himself. The insanity surrounding them couldn't keep from getting a kick out of the ludicrous name.

"Really? You're Doctor Emmett Brown?"

The doc let out a long, tired huff. "Yes, yes. I've been hearing this torment since 1985. Before you ask, no, I don't own a DeLorean, no, I don't know Michael J. Fox, and yes, I like the movie."

Lance held a hand to his sore ribs as he chuckled, wishing he'd met this man under better circumstances. He would have truly enjoyed ribbing him for his name over a beer or two.

He turned to Eifort. "There. You have to take Mr. Back to the Future's family with him."

"I don't know," Eifort said, grimacing. "If anyone finds out..."

"If you don't do this, you're sentencing that child to death." Lance pointed at the baby for emphasis. Teddy grabbed his finger with his tiny hand.

Liz and Don, who were whispering to each other off to the side, stopped and watched Lance's impassioned plea. Liz's head cocked to the side as she looked at him in a way that he hadn't seen in years.

He'd known only condescension for a long time. The odd emotion on her face took him by surprise.

"Oh, fine," Eifort said, running a hand over her hair. "Just stay quiet until we

get to the stadium and we'll figure out the rest from there."

Ashlee let out a cry of relief, giving the female soldier a hug with her free arm. Theodore cooed against her chest, his crying finally ceased.

"Do you have any family or friends outside of the city?" Lance asked.

"I have an uncle in Greensburg." Ashlee wiped a tear of joy from her cheek. "Why?"

"Once you get through whatever bullshit screening they have setup at the stadium, go there. Don't wait for us or anyone else to make it through. Just go."

"How will I get there? I don't have a car or any money or anything." Her smile faltered. "And why shouldn't I wait for you? You're going over there right now, aren't you?"

"We don't know how long the lines will be or what kind of process they're going to run us through. It could be days or weeks before they let us leave." Lance bobbed his head at Don. "Give her some cash so she can get a bus or a cab when she gets out of the city."

Don sneered and opened his mouth before noticing that everyone watched him, waiting for him to do the right thing. His teeth clicked as he clenched his jaw and dug out his wallet.

"Thank you so much," Ashlee said, sheepishly taking the cash Don handed her. "All of you." She gave Lance a quick hug, whispering extra thanks in his ear. "My uncle doesn't actually live in the town of Greensburg, but in the mountains outside of it. When you get out, you should meet us there. It should be a pretty safe place to hide until this dies out. He doesn't have many neighbors."

She recited the address to Lance twice, making him repeat it back to her.

He committed it to memory, fully intending to check in on her if he managed to escape Pittsburgh. The problem was that he didn't like his odds. Things were escalating too rapidly for any kind of rational, coordinated response to have time to work. The flight of the government from the city proved that.

Soldiers climbed into the backs of trucks, most of their equipment already packed up. The vehicles roared to life, several pulling away, others waiting for a full load out.

Eifort moved over to where the captain stood, talking rapidly as he boxed up the last of some cabling. They conversed for several seconds as Lance watched, hoping that she was adequately selling the story they'd conjured.

"Fine," the captain said, dismissing her with a wave. "Just hurry the hell up."

Eifort whistled for the doc and Ashlee to join her. The young mother gave Lance's hand a quick squeeze before speed walking over to where Eifort waited. Brown followed, wishing Lance, Don, and Liz good luck as he walked away.

Relief settled over Lance as he watched them climb into a canopied truck. Ashlee and Brown sat in the rearmost seats, waving as the vehicle pulled away, taking them to safety.

For so long now, Lance's life had spiraled out of his control. He lost his wife, his job, his self-respect. Yesterday he'd been run over by a car and stranded in a hospital during a plague, only to kill a monster with a rifle today.

This was a small victory in the grand scheme of the collapsing world, but it gave him a feeling of accomplishment that he hadn't felt for a long time. If he wasn't surrounded by scrambling soldiers and people dying of an unknown illness, he'd jump in the air and kick his heels.

Liz noticed his demeanor change too. She stared at him for a few seconds as Don droned in her ear, whispering with exaggerated animation and pointing down the street.

Major Reynolds stormed by, shouting orders at a group of soldiers packing a truck.

Lance eased down to the curb, hissing as he finally took weight off his sore feet. He watched as everyone geared up to leave, devising the quickest route to make a mad dash to the stadium. Staying outside of the hospital wouldn't be the safest place for them to remain, but with the soldiers still there, however temporarily, Lance figured it to be as good a place as any. When the last of the trucks pulled away, he would move on.

Don kept giving sidelong glances to Lance as he spoke to Liz.

"So, Don," Lance said, loud enough for them to hear. "How long have you been fucking my wife?"

The civilians, funneling in and out of the FedEx store and a few of the still-standing tents, noticed that the military was heading out and that they weren't being taken along for the ride.

Shouts erupted from several of them as they walked into the street, hands held out in confusion.

"You're taking us with you, right?" a long-haired man in his mid-twenties asked. He jogged over to one of the trucks with a canopied bed, pleading with the soldiers in the back.

"Step away from the vehicle, sir." The rearmost soldier stood in the opening, a hand raised over his head, holding the frame of the canopy.

"Where are you going? Aren't there any trucks for us?" The man kept coming forward until he was within reaching distance of the tailgate.

"Instructions will be given to you shortly, but for now I need you to stay back. For your own safety."

Lance scoffed at the safety remark from his perch on the sidewalk. Safety had become a relative term over the past few days.

Don and Liz stood a few yards away, dumbstruck by his comment, furiously whispering at each other. They stopped for a moment, watching the angry crowd approach the truck.

"Take me with you!" Long Hair grabbed the back of the truck and tried to hoist himself inside. He took a boot to the face for his effort.

The man fell onto the pavement, landing on his back, the whoosh of air bursting from his lungs audible from the other side of the street.

More civilians ran over, protesting the man's treatment, shouting questions at the increasingly agitated soldiers.

"Everyone needs to remain calm. Help is coming," the soldier-who-likes-to-kick-people yelled over the dissent.

"Bullshit! You're supposed to be the help!" Two more people approached the truck. They grabbed the canopy as the vehicle shuddered forward, the driver eyeing the approaching crowd in his mirrors.

The growing mob panicked and ran after the truck, screaming and punching at the metal sides. The two men holding the fabric of the soft top clung on for half a block before the butts of rifles smashed their hands free. They tumbled and rolled in the street, abrasions and cuts tearing into exposed skin.

The few soldiers that hadn't climbed into the vehicles yet dropped what equipment they carried and sprinted to the nearest truck. They watched as the crowd turned its frustration on them, throwing bottles of water and cursing their cowardice.

Thirty seconds later, the military presence on the block was gone. They drove down the closed streets, ignoring the now useless traffic signals and construction zones, until they turned a corner and disappeared.

The furious group followed for a while, angrily screaming for mercy and compassion, finding none. After a few hundred feet, their pursuit ground to a halt.

Vandalism started shortly thereafter.

Liz turned her attention back to Lance. "I'm going to ignore what you just said to Don."

"Why?" Lance stared at the filthy street his feet rested on. The cold concrete of the curb numbed his backside, easing some of the pain in his left side. "The truth hurts too much?"

"How can you be so insulting at—?"

"Spare me the indignation."

Don glared at him. "How did you know?"

“Don!” Liz spun on him, her mouth an O of exasperation.

“He obviously knows,” Don said, shrugging.

Lance forced himself to stay seated, knowing what would happen if he got to his feet. Pending divorce or not, the idea of someone else nailing his wife didn’t sit well. He wanted to beat the shit out of Don and he knew he could get away with it as the authorities just went to Splitsville.

So he stayed on the curb.

For now.

“What I want to know is how long you guys have been doing the horizontal mambo?”

Liz held her face in her hands.

A smile cracked Don’s face. “Eighteen months.”

The words hit Lance like a blow to the stomach. He wanted to cry, vomit, and rage all at the same time. His jaw muscles worked as he stared at a cigarette butt on the street, his emotions threatening to boil over.

Eighteen fucking months.

“I guess our little run in yesterday wasn’t accidental either.”

“Nope.”

“Did you send him to intercept me after my job interview?” Lance asked, turning, his eyes boring into Liz. “Figure you could find out if I was going to sign the papers this week?”

In a fit of anger a few days prior, Lance had threatened not to sign their divorce paperwork. She came home in a foul mood that afternoon, angry about something that had nothing to do with Lance. She’d started on him before the front door even closed behind her.

The ammunition she used on him that day consisted of her number one talking point—his inability to give her children.

That frustration, in and of itself, gnawed at Lance’s ego more than anything. Liz had always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, something that he agreed she would be great at. She loved children and envied all of her friends who’d entered motherhood over the years.

They’d tried for two years before he finally relented and had himself tested.

A gnawing suspicion had worked at him for a while before he went to the clinic that day. The results were what he feared—he was infertile. Something about knowing that he couldn't fulfill one of his primary duties as a husband crushed Lance on a level he didn't even understand.

More than the lost jobs and income, their childless home drove the irreparable chasm between them. The one thing she desired above all others was the only thing he could never provide her.

The heat really turned on when she approached the age of thirty. Her biological clock ticked louder than ever, and Lance didn't have the tools to keep it quiet.

To say that he felt like less of a man because of it would be an understatement of ludicrous proportions. Whenever Liz wanted to put him down, all she had to do was bring that up.

Last week, when she mentioned the fact that she was a thirty-five-year-old woman without any children, Lance threatened to lengthen her misery. If he didn't grant her the divorce right away, she couldn't be rid of him as quickly as she wanted.

It was a petty, stupid, and hollow threat. He wanted out of the marriage as much she did, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

"Lance, I'm sorry," Liz said. She let her hands fall to her side, exposing her leaking eyes. "I didn't want you to find out like this."

"Oh really? What did you figure the best way to tell me was? Maybe let it go on for another year or so and then pretend that it was something new?"

Liz shook her head but didn't reply.

Don maintained his smile. "How long have you known?"

"It was pretty fucking obvious when I came out of the hospital and found you guys holding hands."

"Oops." His grin grew even larger.

Lance's hands clenched as they rested in his lap. "I wondered why you kept asking about Liz when I ran into you on the sidewalk, and how she remembered your name after all of those years. If everything else wasn't going on, I would have figured it out faster. To be honest, Liz, I expected you to have a boyfriend

at some point, but eighteen *months* ago? Why wait a half a year after that to finally file for divorce?”

Liz started to respond when Don put a hand on her shoulder.

“What does it matter, buddy? It’s over. Let’s all move on.” He kept on smiling, obviously enjoying the despair he saw in Lance.

“You need to shut the fuck up, Don.”

A group of men down the street threw a garbage can through the window of a department store. They hooted and hollered as they climbed inside, looting the place.

“Listen, buddy—”

“I’m not your goddamn *buddy*, Don.”

“Whatever. *Lance*, we’re going to the stadium now. I’d prefer it if you waited around for a little while before following. This is awkward enough without having to hear you bitch the entire way there.” Don threw his arm around Liz’s shoulders and stuck his chin out.

Liz inspected the ground, quiet.

“I’m trying to talk to my wife, so keep your mouth shut.” Lance’s tenuous grasp on his emotions slipped with every utterance that came from Don’s mouth. “Why the deception? Why the wait? Why continue to tear me down and make me feel worthless when you had someone else on the side for so long? And you, Don. How pathetic is it that you would pretend to give a shit about me getting hit by the car?”

He climbed off the curb and stepped toward them, not knowing what he would do next.

Don met him halfway, pushing him in the chest. “One more step and I’ll drop you.”

Lance didn’t expect the push and he stumbled sideways, his shoulder smashing against the brick exterior of the parking garage. He pushed away from the wall and lunged at Don, his fury exploding as he thought of all the embarrassment and emasculation he’d suffered over the past eighteen months.

He lobbed a sloppy punch that missed by a foot, throwing him off balance.

Don sidestepped the blow with ease and connected with a short left hook that

skewed Lance's equilibrium.

"Three years of boxing, buddy."

Lance tried to focus on the bigger man, but his vision wouldn't focus quite right. His ass bumped into a garbage can, allowing him to regain a modicum of stability. He squared his shoulders and widened his feet when a bolt of white-hot agony shot up his left leg.

His foot cramped, the arch squeezing in on itself as he lifted it to see what happened. A piece of dark glass, similar to that of a beer bottle, stuck out of the bottom of his foot, blood already welling around the puncture.

"Shit!" Lance steadied himself on the garbage can and pinched the shard with his fingers, holding in a squeal as it moved in the incision. He pulled it out with a hiss, staring at it in anger, before throwing it into the trash can.

Don smirked, a small laugh escaping him.

Lance's blood boiled at the mockery and he reared back to throw another punch when Don caught him with a right hook that sent him to the sidewalk.

Pain bloomed in his temple. A warm, sticky line ran down his cheek. He watched Don through bleary eyes and muttered, "Eighteen months."

"Deal with it, buddy." Don grabbed Liz's hand and pulled her away, leading them down the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry, Lance," Liz said as she looked back over her shoulder.

How she had expected everything to play out still eluded Lance. There was no way that he would ever take this kind of news well. While it was true that he wanted out of the marriage as much as she did, the idea of her cheating on him before the divorce process even started made him queasy.

His head and foot throbbed as he pushed himself to a seated position. He sat on the curb again, watching as people looted and destroyed the street. Their anger mirrored his own as they lashed out at anything in their path. He wondered if the other infected cities collapsed as quickly as Pittsburgh.

Blood continued to seep from his foot, the pool under his heel growing as he watched. He wiped at the line running down his cheek.

A shriek came from an open window in the hospital to his right.

"Shit," he muttered as he got to his feet, favoring his wounded left foot.

“Can’t believe I’m down here getting in a fistfight while there are crazy mutants running around.”

There was no chance he could walk the several miles to the stadium on his wounded foot without shoes or clothing. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to go there, at this point. *She* would be there, and the thought of running into them again didn’t sit well.

His apartment was only a few blocks to the north—he could make it in an hour or two if he didn’t run into any snags along the way. Food, clothing, and water waited for him there.

He could sleep in his own bed and try to ride this thing out. Or he could at least die in his own home. That sounded better than most of his other options.

Two men fought over a television on the sidewalk in front of a bar. Part of the wall mount clung to the back of the TV as they tried to wrestle it from one another. They threw blows at each other moments later.

Lance ignored them as he tested how much pressure he could put on his foot. The pain was bad, but bearable. His concern over contracting some kind of disease from walking on the bare, filthy streets of Pittsburgh outweighed any discomfort he had to endure.

A window on the side of the hospital shattered, the glass raining onto the sidewalk below. The body of a woman followed, landing on the glass and concrete with a hollow thud like a smashed watermelon.

The random fights in the crowd abated as everyone stared at the mangled corpse. Their eyes surveyed the side of the building until they found the window the woman came from.

The head of an eyeless beast poked through the jagged pieces of glass that remained, an inhuman wail echoing off the suddenly silent street.

Other infected answered the call, loosing a dozen cries through the building. Chaos followed.

People fled, dropping their stolen wares and abandoning their friends. They ran in all directions, screaming and crying, shoving others out of their way. A teenager climbed the pole holding the lights at an intersection, yelling at anyone who tried to follow him up.

Lance waited, knowing that he couldn't fight through the herd until it thinned. His foot wouldn't allow him to keep up and he would end up getting trampled to death. As he stared at the panic and confusion, he knew that this was what waited at Heinz Field.

People wanted out and they would kill each other to get there. The government would have its hands full if they thought they could contain this.

He eyed the hospital, scanning the windows in case something decided to come outside. Several faces stared back at him from inside locked rooms. He couldn't help but question who was safer—the people barricaded in the hospital with those things, or him in the streets with a fearful population.

The crowd thinned within minutes and he set off, using his left hand along the walls of buildings and handrails, needing the support to keep pressure off his foot. A trail of bloody footprints followed in his wake.

Two cars were flipped over, their windows smashed in. People ran up and down the streets, generally ignoring each other as they smashed and stole their way through the city. He couldn't believe how quickly everyone took to thievery as soon as the law left town.

A liquor store that Lance frequented was stripped bare. Empty shelves, opened freezers, and smashed bottles were all that remained. Lance felt sorry for those who couldn't keep themselves from drinking their days away even as the world came crashing down.

He had to stop and take breaks every fifteen minutes. Fatigue and pain threatened to bring a halt to his journey, so he bided his time and rested when he couldn't stand the anguish in his foot. The soreness in his left side abated a bit as he went, the muscles stretching and relaxing, even as the lower part of his body worsened.

As he sat on the steps of an apartment building, the tenants going in and out with armfuls of groceries and electronics, he spotted one of the sick—a man in the early stages of the illness.

He appeared more coherent than the woman he'd encountered the day before, though his motor skills were off and he still mumbled. The man walked on the other side of the street, looking around as if he didn't understand where he

was.

People scrambled away when they saw him, shouting for help and threatening him to stay back.

He didn't listen.

The man made it to the front of a closed Subway when a gang of polo-shirt-wearing men came up from behind him. They held baseball bats, crowbars, brooms, and even a bowling pin.

Lance saw them coming and knew what would happen next. He got up and rushed away as fast as his bare feet would allow, ignoring the angry taunts and muted bludgeoning that came from behind him.

More of the infected wandered ahead, but their madness was more advanced, any aggressors not daring to go near such insanity. They stumbled through the streets, mostly ignoring everyone. A few gave chase to the slower, fatter populace of the 'Burgh.

One woman stood out among the rest. The shade of her skin neared translucence, her skeletal system already deforming. Lance never saw the front of her, but he knew that her eyes were shriveled, her face full of veins. The murderous desire had already begun to overtake her.

Lance took a different street, knowing that the detour would cost him precious time, but he dared not go near the woman. The alleys had less people, though the fear of being caught in one with an infected person kept him from using them.

He couldn't outrun anyone if cornered, so he chose his path carefully. The bleeding from his foot slowed as he went, his trail less obvious.

The pain never lessened.

Though he saw several beatings and heard dozens more, Lance never saw a police officer or EMT. He lost count of how many of the banshee-like screams he heard come from apartment buildings and businesses.

The sun neared the horizon by the time he stumbled onto his block and caught sight of his aging building. As the streets darkened, more of the sick appeared, their movements more fluid, the sluggishness he'd seen earlier gone.

Lance whispered a tiny prayer as he painstakingly climbed the stairs to his

apartment, glad that he'd made it home before dark. Something about the night attracted them, and he didn't want to be around when they took control of the streets.

Steam clouded the mirror, the bathroom fan unable to keep up. Lance stared at the tub of hot water, working up the courage to step in. He grabbed a towel from the rack beside the door and squeezed it in his hands, hoping to channel some of his oncoming anguish into it.

He sat on the edge of the tub and slowly lowered his uninjured foot into it, hissing at the heat. The toll of walking on the streets in his bare feet was greater than he realized. The agony of every abrasion and knick intensified as he held the foot there, gritting his teeth and squeezing the towel.

After an excruciating half a minute, the pain ebbed.

“And that was the good foot,” Lance muttered to the empty room.

He lowered the rest of his body, minus his sliced foot, into the water at a snail’s pace. The heat warmed him immediately, attacking the soreness in his ribs and shoulder. It had been years since he’d taken a bath, and at that moment, he couldn’t figure out why.

His left foot hovered above the surface as he submerged himself up to the neck. The impending pain hung over him, making his face pinch in on itself as he gathered what little willpower remained.

Taking a deep breath, he dunked his foot and squeezed the towel as if he wanted to murder it. He bit back a scream, thumping his left hand on the outside of the tub. The end of the balled-up towel went between his teeth and he hyperventilated against it. It took everything he had to keep his foot submerged.

The misery eased fractionally, giving him only the slightest relief.

The bottoms of his feet had blackened with filth from the walk. He desperately wanted to avoid infection, realizing that a trip to his general practitioner probably wouldn't happen again in the next millennia.

The worst part remained.

He scooted forward, his shoulders coming out of the water, and pulled his foot toward his face. The wound was dirty, but didn't appear particularly deep. It was just enough to hurt like hell.

Lance never liked having his feet messed with or tickled, so having a piece of a glass stab into his arch came straight out of a nightmare.

The next twenty minutes consisted of swearing, scrubbing, and possibly a tear or two, though Lance tried to convince himself that some soap got in his eyes.

He found bandages in the hall closet and attached a large one to his foot. Too much pressure caused pain, so he walked around the apartment on his heel, glad that no one was around to see how ridiculous he looked.

His favorite robe clung to him as he shambled around, enjoying its comfort in silence. Liz hated its tattered appearance and made sure to say something every time he wore it.

Wearing it now without her constant nagging proved a great comfort amidst the carnage outside.

After a series of rapes occurred in the city a few years ago, Lance bought Liz a small pistol for her purse. He'd never gotten around to getting her a concealed carry permit because, as far as he knew, she never took the damn thing with her anyway. She hated guns and wouldn't even relent to going to a shooting range for practice. After several arguments over it, he began to wonder why he bought it in the first place.

He dug in her dresser drawers and rifled through her closet, hoping she hadn't thrown it away. After several minutes of searching, he found a box of bullets but couldn't find the gun anywhere.

"Damn it, Liz. You should have known that I would need that stupid thing when the world ended."

He left the room in ruins, knowing she probably wouldn't see the apartment ever again. If they managed to get out of Pittsburgh, there wasn't much reason for them to chance coming back. Even if the plague died out and humanity prevailed, what would remain of the civilization here?

Mankind was rapidly sliding down the food chain.

He settled for a butcher's knife he took from a magnet hanging above the counter.

As the sun finally set, Lance took a seat by the window and watched the street below. Normal people were scarce, though he could see lights in many apartments across the street. The sick and violent roamed the city, their cries filling the night.

Lance sat and listened to them for several minutes, shivering when he heard someone screaming in agony as they were torn apart in a nearby alley.

He had no chance of making it anywhere else tonight, so he decided to secure the place as best he could. He closed all the blinds and pulled the curtains, taping the edges to the walls so no light could seep through. The electricity still flowed, and he planned to utilize it as long as he could.

The spare bedroom had a poster bed in it. It was a gift from Liz's parents, so he thoroughly enjoyed destroying it. He disassembled the footboard and pulled the slats out, taking the wood into the front room and setting it beside the door. A hammer and nails came from the closet and he used them to cinch the footboard to the floor. He gave it several heavy shots with the hammer to make sure it was secure.

He broke one of the slats in half over his knee and nailed the pieces to the door. The poster columns didn't quite fit between the slats and the floorboard, so he cut them to the proper length with a handsaw and jammed them in place.

The custom barricade felt solid as he pulled at the door. It would take a silverback to break into the apartment.

Unfortunately for him, there were things prowling the streets that might have the strength to pull it off.

Even still, he felt better knowing that he wouldn't have to deal with any human intruders.

After frying some eggs and buttering two slices of toast, Lance fell into his favorite recliner with a huff. He pulled on the handle and eased back with his feet in the air. Nothing short of a crane could get him out of the chair for the rest of the night.

He pawed at the remote, too tired and lethargic to pick it up. Surprisingly, the cable still worked.

“Bastards really did cut off the signal in the hospital. Morons.”

All the news stations flashed alert messages, the talking heads tired and near hysterical in their reporting. Lance settled on CNN, if only because they had a pretty anchor on at the time.

“...full evacuation. Again, if anyone in your family or home has exhibited any signs of contagion, we urge you to leave the area immediately. You must understand that help will not come if you call 911. The police and EMTs are overloaded with calls. Most major cities are being evacuated, but each one has different protocols to follow. We’ll run any information that is given to us throughout the night.”

Lance shoveled some eggs into his mouth as he watched, wishing they would tell him something he didn’t know.

The camera angle changed, showing a guest sitting beside the newscaster. The man wore a suit that needed dry-cleaning in the worst way. Two-day beard growth and bagged eyes completed the exhausted look.

“We’re joined again by Dr. Newsome. Do you have anything to update us with in regards to the Xavier virus?”

Lance’s forehead wrinkled. “Xavier virus? Weird name.”

“If you’ll recall, I theorized that the smoke bomb pranks happening around the city might not have been pranks at all. The CDC has just come back with the results of extensive testing on the canisters found in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and several other afflicted cities. They weren’t smoke bombs.” He paused, clearing his throat. *“The United States is under attack. Someone has engaged in biological warfare with us. This epidemic is not a random occurrence.”*

“Dr. Newsome, you’re saying that the Xavier virus was unleashed upon us

intentionally? The implications of that are incredible. You're talking about the start of another World War."

"That's correct. Someone is trying to commit genocide." He stared at his hands, his voice lowering. *"And it's working."*

"Do you know if anyone has claimed responsibility for the attack yet?"

"No."

Lance stared blankly at the television, a mouthful of half-chewed toast in his slack jaw. Someone unleashed biological weapons against the United States? Someone hated a country's government so much that they would cause the illness, mutation, and death occurring outside?

While smoking copious amounts of marijuana in college, Lance and his friends often debated about the course mankind was on. His buddies thought the planet would crash and burn eventually, imploding because some moron fell asleep at the controls, or two arrogant world leaders would launch nukes at one another because they suffered from penis envy. Lance maintained that alarmism usually proved wrong, and that people would continue on as they always had.

Turns out, he was wrong.

"When we spoke this afternoon, you said that only North America appeared to be infected at this point. Is that still the case?"

The doctor perked up a bit, his shoulders squaring. *"Yes, that's correct. The canisters only went off in the United States, but Canada and Mexico have both reported cases of the illness in their countries now as well. We believe that the shutdown of international travel happened early enough that this horror has been quarantined to our continent."*

Lance finished his food. His hunger died during the news report, but he knew that he needed the calories, so he forced it down. He fully reclined in the chair, staring at the pictures hanging on the wall beside the television.

Photographs of him and Liz in Los Angeles, touring Universal. The two of them petting Shamu at Sea World. A collage from their wedding day hung above the others, their young, fresh faces unprepared for the disaster their marriage would become.

Tears flowed as he looked them over. He didn't despair because of his lost

relationship, but over the entire trajectory of his life. Years upon years, he wasted energy and time stressing over his career. His wife. His lack of children.

And for what?

The city burned around him. People ate each other in the streets, their minds washed away like sand on a beach.

So much of his life had been dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, when he didn't even know what that truly was. He lusted after the kind of life that everyone said he should desire, rather than looking inward and following his heart.

Now he sat alone in an apartment, waiting for death to knock on his door. His wife would spend the night with another man, fleeing the very city she'd spent her life in with Lance.

He would die soon and he was just realizing that he'd never really lived.

The shrieks from the mutated and the mad grew in frequency as he sat there. They came from all sides, surrounding his building. More filled the apartments above him, bouncing down the stairwells to his third floor place, making him wonder how long he had until they came for him.

But even if they did, what did it matter? What did he have worth fighting for?

"...still haven't identified any kind of treatment. Things are simply progressing at too fast a rate for us to make any headway. All I can say is that you should get far away from anyone showing any signs of infection. That's the best thing you can do at this time."

"The first of the attacks occurred four days ago. How is it possible that this could have spread so quickly in such a short amount of time, Doctor? And how can it do such damage to the human body in just a few days?"

"Well, anyone that came in contact with the chemical agent from the smoke canisters was immediately infected, we know that much. How it has spread from there is something we're still debating. Touch alone doesn't seem to transmit the virus, but saliva, blood, and other bodily fluids do appear to have an effect. If I had to guess, I'd say that people went home and kissed their loved ones. Those people went to the gym, the doctor's office, or a restaurant. As for how this is

doing such extensive damage to the human body... well, we just can't answer that yet. The CDC is finally releasing pieces of information. They believe it's a prion disease that is destroying higher brain function, but we're hotly contesting that hypothesis because of the short incubation period. We do know that the hypothalamus, which regulates body temperature and hunger, is directly affected. It's a truly tremendous piece of engineering and..."

Lance tuned the man out before he started giving verbal high-fives to the terrorists that designed the Xavier virus, whatever it was.

Gunfire went off in the street below. Lance fought the urge to open the curtains and look.

He wanted to ensure that no one knew that he occupied his apartment.

The small-arms battle continued for close to half an hour before cries of pain and pleas for mercy fell into silence.

"...thank you for joining us once again, Dr. Newsome. God be with you."

"God be with us all. We're going to need all the help we can get it."

Lance left the television on as he fell into a restless sleep in the chair.

The screech of metal on metal kicked Lance out of a dream that faded from memory within seconds.

He awoke in semi-darkness, the television providing the only light in the apartment. The taped curtains turned his place into a tomb. People chattered outside, audible because of the dearth of traffic.

Lance stretched in the chair, wincing when the skin on the bottom of his foot shifted. He got out of the recliner and hobbled to the window, peeling back a section of tape.

A group of people stood around a car on the other side of the street. Most of them were armed with bats and kitchen knives, casting wary glances up and down the road. Several men stood around a large SUV, the hood propped open, pointing at the engine. Others pushed a car away from the back of the big vehicle, its door screeching along the side of a truck as they moved it into the street.

The sun crested over the corner of the U.S. Steel Tower. Lance held a hand up to cut down on the glare as he watched the people fill the SUV with bottles of water and bags of potato chips. Two children walked down the front steps of the building across the street, holding their mother's hands.

They climbed into the backseat of the vehicle, followed by the women. The men closed the hood several minutes later and a few hopped inside, closing the doors. The rest of the people went to another SUV in front of it and got in. The

two-vehicle caravan eased into the street and disappeared around the next corner.

Lance wished them luck, but he knew the trouble waiting for them as they tried to escape the city. He didn't know if the military had started destroying some of the bridges leading out of the burgh, though he figured it would only be a matter of time.

A freshly infected child stumbled from an alley beside the apartment building, her skin already ashy and thinning.

Lance resealed the window, fighting against the emotions surging through him at the sight of the young girl. How many children died yesterday? How many more would suffer horrible deaths in the coming days?

He changed the television channel to KDKA, the local CBS affiliate. A map of the city filled the screen with arrows pointing to a few spots around the I-76 and I-79 beltway. Another marker hovered above Heinz Field. Large X's covered major highways and bridges. How they planned to funnel several hundred thousand people through three sites, Lance didn't know.

He could only hope that they'd been able to get more organized at the evacuation points than they were at the hospital. Granted, no one could have anticipated this level of craziness.

Someone walked by the door of his apartment, their voice booming.

"Way to bring attention to yourself," Lance muttered as he limped to his kitchen.

Quite a few people remained in his building, but Lance didn't know if that was good or bad. Having the place to himself might be safer. Then again, hearing other people, rational people, frightened as they were, gave him a small level of comfort. That didn't mean he planned on dealing with them, however.

People are dangerous when they're frightened.

A quick inspection of his cabinets and refrigerator confirmed what he already expected—his food rations were dangerously low. A few more eggs, some questionable lunchmeat, and a small amount rice and bread remained. He didn't think he could live on spices, but he might have to give it a try if he didn't find more food soon.

The thought of checking out the Giant Eagle down the street made his

stomach do flips. Even if the left side of his body wasn't sore and his foot didn't have a puncture wound, he wouldn't want to go down there. The amount of people looting the place, fighting over who had the right to steal the food, was enough to keep him away.

If he had a gun, he might consider it. Going in there with a knife and a severe limp was a recipe for disaster.

He considered breaking in to his neighbors' apartments to scrounge for food, but he feared some of them might be hiding inside, armed with shotguns. Getting shot was low on Lance's list of priorities.

The internet still worked, shockingly, so he settled back into the recliner with his laptop. The blogosphere buzzed with reports and pictures and conspiracy theories. Some people thought the plague was a false flag event that went awry. A disease designed by the United States' government to instill fear in the populace, but which ultimately turned on its master like Frankenstein's monster.

YouTube and Facebook were rampant with videos and pictures of the infected attacking family members and breaking down doors. Lance's eyes darted to his homemade barricade, praying it would hold if something came knocking.

Normally, YouTube would have censored such violence, yet the videos remained, making Lance wonder if anyone remained at the controls. Fox News' site never loaded, a 500 Internal Server Error message filling the screen.

As far as Lance could tell as he browsed around, most of the major U.S. cities had massive amounts of infection. The sparsely populated center of the country had far less of a problem than the coastal cities. Evacuations had started in over thirty areas so far, with New York City leading the pack. It would be easier to cut off access to and from an island, than a sprawling city like Pittsburgh.

The death toll estimates ran the full gamut. The range started at fifty thousand and topped off as high as one million. Lance guessed that number would explode over the next few weeks, particularly in the cities where the police were no longer around.

The Europeans and Australians had completely locked their borders down.

Australia in particular, felt they could contain the situation because of their geography. To some commentators' surprise, no occurrences of the Xavier virus had popped up outside of North America—yet.

An emergency meeting of the United Nations happened yesterday, but the results had not been released to the public. They promised swift action, but Lance wondered what they could do without risking contamination in their own countries.

The U.S. president flew somewhere over the Midwest in Air Force One. He would be safe up there, unless things got so bad on the ground that in-air refueling became impossible.

Did the government have some kind of underground bunker for emergencies such as this? Lance did several Google searches, but couldn't find anything concrete. He assumed they did. Is that where the senators and governors headed now? Abandoning their constituents to save their own asses would be fitting.

The Russians were losing their shit. Crazy recommendations came out of the Kremlin, such as shooting anyone showing signs of infection or even bombing the worst of the cities. Conflicting reports said that these suggestions weren't from the actual Russian government, but from a rogue sect in their military.

The idea gave Lance chills. He'd been considering staying in the city for a while, knowing how hard it would be to get through any of the checkpoints. Would the president consider incinerating certain parts of the population to keep others alive? If so, then Lance needed to come up with a new plan to get the hell out of Dodge.

Lance knew that governments did crazy things all the time, but he just couldn't imagine Americans bombing their own cities. Even still, being prepared to leave at a moment's notice might not be a bad idea.

Wanting to take advantage of the power and internet still working, Lance printed out a map of Pennsylvania. If he had to leave the city, he wasn't certain if he would head east or west. Going inland meant a smaller population and a lower chance of infection. If he went to the coast, he might be able to steal a boat and anchor off the shore.

Maybe he could swing by the Greensburg area and check on Ashlee and

Teddy.

He found his old college backpack in the hallway closet and stuffed socks and underwear into it. They didn't have any bottled water, so he made a mental note to grab some from a Sheetz or a restaurant.

Even then, as he prepared for a quick escape if necessary, he wondered why he even bothered. He didn't have much to live for. No one cared, or would even notice, if he disappeared. He rented a shitty apartment so he didn't even have a nice home to die in.

Yet he continued scrounging up whatever supplies he could and packing them away. Being eaten alive, it turned out, was even less appealing to him than living his mundane life. He grabbed extra bandages and tweezers from Liz's medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Two rolls of toilet paper went in the bag. Running out of that might be worse than having the glass shard cut his foot.

More eggs and bread. He found a small jar of honey in the back of the refrigerator that he spread on the toast.

The news continued reporting. They often stopped to talk about a few of their fellow anchors and cameramen who hadn't come back to work. The programming looked rough, unpolished. The talking head wasn't centered in the frame occasionally, or they looked at the wrong camera.

Shots of the evacuation points in NYC proved Lance's theory about the difficulty of getting out of any cities. Mass chaos enveloped the areas. People shoved and prodded against the ever-growing crowd, fighting to move up just one spot in lines that stretched for miles. Concert-like waves shuddered through the army of would-be refugees.

The Golden Gate Bridge overflowed with San Franciscans. A few people tumbled over the side, dropping end over end to the waters below. The swelling crowd pushed more people to the brink of falling. CNN switched away from the site as a dozen civilians fell to their deaths.

Gunfire crisscrossed the skies of Philadelphia as a helicopter strafed a wide street, peppering a small group of translucent-skinned people.

Lance checked the windows often, surprised by how many people he saw milling about. Only a few of the sick came by. Small groups of scared citizens

often struck them down. Their blood flowed into gutters and grates, their bodies left where they fell.

The lack of infected took Lance off guard. Maybe things weren't as bad as he thought.

A Pentagon official appeared on the TV two hours later, concurring with what Lance noticed.

"...a noticeable decrease in the amount of sick today. We think they're crawling away and dying somewhere. The disease appears to have a lifespan of four or five days before the subjects pass away."

The pretty blonde that Lance grew accustomed to had been replaced by a middle-aged bald man. He lacked the grace and fluidity in his reporting style that his female counterpart possessed.

"But where are the bodies?"

"We've found several in the streets. We're getting reports that some have died in their homes."

"We've seen those reports as well, but the number of bodies found isn't anywhere near the number of infected. How do you—?"

"I understand your concerns, but we have recon teams operating in every city looking into it. We have every confidence that this is already winding down. The Xavier virus is burning itself out inside of a week. Starting tomorrow, we're going to move back into the cities and begin the long, arduous process of restoring order. Hospitals will go online within a day or so."

The reporter sat at his desk, stunned. *"It's over, just like that? What appeared to be the end of civilization as we know it, has killed itself off?"* The man's throat worked. *"What steps should people take now? Is evacuation still necessary?"*

"No. In fact, we're ordering people to turn around and go back—"

Lance stared at the ceiling. So that was it. The threat was over.

He heard the occasional cries from outside, but they were sporadic.

The television stayed on as he drifted off again, falling asleep before the night arrived.

The gloom and doom that dominated previous reports fell away as people began to perk up, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

No one expected what came at nightfall.

The spectral wail of the infected stabbed at Lance's ears.

He jumped out of the recliner, confused and disoriented. His foot throbbed when he landed on it.

Agonized screams and bloodcurdling cries for mercy came from the window. He hobbled over, shoulders tensing as he reached for the taped curtains. He paused before opening them, realizing the television blared behind him, and turned around to shut it off. Any light visible from his apartment would give away his position.

Flashes of mutation skirted along the edges of light provided by the streetlamps. Lance saw glimpses of massive musculature and distended arms and fingers.

Bile stung his throat as he watched a woman get torn apart at the waist, two of the creatures fighting over her flesh.

They'd grown larger and faster.

Meaner.

Hungrier.

People fled in all directions, chased down by the beasts.

A man stood in the window of an apartment across the street, firing a shotgun at the infected as they ran by. He stepped back when he ran out of ammo and reloaded, shoving shells in as fast as he could.

Lance watched, horrified and awestruck, as one of the brutes lunged from the

sidewalk, grabbing hold of a window ledge on the first floor. It leapt to the second story window with ease, climbing the building like an acrobat from hell.

The shotgun-wielding man never saw it coming. Lance wanted to shout a warning, but dared not give away his position.

It burst through the window as the man shoved another shell into his weapon. His cries of agony carried to Lance from across the street.

A car dirt-tracked around the corner, barreling through an intersection at an uncontrollable speed. It sprinted forward, engine growling, and smashed into one of the mutants, metal and meat crushing under the impact. The car veered from the collision and ran onto the sidewalk, hitting a garbage can before ramping up the steps of a building.

Two more of the infected leapt from shadows as the driver opened the door. He didn't get out of his seat before they were on him, claws tearing at the interior of the car.

His screams only lasted a few seconds.

"My god." Lance gaped at the havoc for a couple of moments before covering the window up again.

He paced around the apartment, hands shaking, teeth chattering like he had hypothermia. It didn't seem fair. He fell asleep under the impression that the Xavier virus had burned itself out. Now the infected stalked the streets like a nightmare.

"They're dying out," he said, mocking the Pentagon official. "My ass. They're climbing the fucking walls."

Where had they been all day? Lance saw one of them shy away from a light in the hospital, but it hadn't meant much to him at the time. Did they not like light?

He went over to the window again, peeling back just enough of the curtain to stick his head through. He focused on the area under the streetlights, doing his best to ignore the insanity that pervaded the night. *They* occasionally ran under the lights, but they never lingered. Usually, they skirted the illuminated area, wailing into the night like hellhounds.

An explosion rocked the neighborhood.

The windows in Lance's building rattled. Car alarms triggered. The beasts shrieked.

A ball of fire licked the night sky, peaking over a large building down the street. Lance knew a gas station was nestled back there. He'd often thought to himself about the horrid location of the place as he drove by.

Several of the infected poured from the mouth of an alley, fleeing the fire behind them, ducking into the shadows of cars and dumpsters and stairwells.

Confirmation settled in Lance's mind—they hid during the day because they feared the light. Did it harm them? He considered how their skin changed, growing gray and thin.

His inability to defend himself thundered home as he watched the carnage. A knife wouldn't suffice. They'd tear him apart with ease. He needed a gun.

Though he and Liz had lived in the building for several years, they didn't know any of their neighbors. They recognized some of them by sight and well enough to say hello, but he wasn't even aware of their jobs. Could one of them have a gun in their apartment?

If he tried to break into a neighbor's place, the racket might attract attention. He decided to wait out the night, hoping the morning sun would send these bastards back to whatever hole they hid in yesterday.

He looked back at the barricaded door. It might be strong enough to keep one of them at bay. His windows were the problem. They had no issues climbing buildings and smashing through glass. The thought of nailing a table across the window occurred to him briefly, but he figured they'd break through it like balsa wood.

Turning the television back on, Lance lowered the volume to barely above a whisper. He stood three feet from the screen, staring at the warfare displayed.

Tanks fired at a shopping mall in Boston. The front of a JC Penney exploded outward, showering the parking lot with debris.

Apaches fired rockets into the entrance of a subway station in Washington D.C.

Hundreds of the infected stormed down a street in Cincinnati, gunfire cutting them down as they plowed forward. They jumped off the sides of buildings and

lunged from the hoods of cars. A line of soldiers waited for them at the base of a suspension bridge, loosing bullets at a maniacal pace.

The beasts hit them like a tidal wave. One moment the soldiers bravely stood their ground—the next they were torn to shreds on national television.

The camera cut to the studio, the newscaster sitting behind a desk, mouth agape.

“Matt! You’re on!” The voice came from off camera.

Matt snapped to, shuffling papers in front of him. An Alfalfa spike stuck out from the crown of his head. *“Uhh—”* He looked off to his right, holding his arms out, palms up. *“I don’t know what to say! This is fucking crazy!”*

Lance could relate.

Matt ran his hands through his hair. *“We’re looking at... devastation. The sick that we were told had died during the day have reappeared. They’re attacking randomly... consuming everything in sight. I implore you to stay indoors, turn your lights off, and pray. The military is currently engaging them across the nation and—”*

A shriek came through the TV.

Matt recoiled, his hands jerking up, the papers flittering through the air. *“The hell was that?”*

Someone screamed off camera and Matt stood from his chair, his head snapping around as if on a swivel.

A blur of muscle and claw flashed from the left side of the screen, pouncing on Matt and knocking him behind the desk. Lance couldn’t see what it did to him, but the screams and arterial spray coming from the other side of the dark mahogany left little to the imagination.

People ran past the camera, casting glances over their shoulders as something devoured their co-worker a few feet away. No one tried to help him.

Lance changed the channel.

The camera pointed at an empty set on MSNBC.

C-SPAN ran footage of a massive battle in San Diego. A tank rambled down a street, rolling over the hood of a car as it headed toward the frontline, tracks sliding on the concrete. It fired into a group of the infected standing by a water

fountain. Red mist sprayed through the air.

Transfixed by the strife, Lance stood in front of the TV, unable to decide what to do next. He didn't dare leave his apartment, but he also felt like a sitting duck by staying there. If anything came through the window, it would be game over.

Needing to do something, he lit a candle and went into the kitchen, refusing to use any lights, fearing that something outside might notice. He checked the cupboards again, hoping that he'd missed some food in the back, but came away disappointed. If fear didn't drive him from the apartment, hunger would in due time.

If his theory was right and the infected didn't like light, he might be able to go somewhere during the day. Maybe he could find a more secure location and stock it with supplies.

Maybe a pig would fly out of his ass too.

He knew what would happen tomorrow. Those who survived the darkness would turn on each other, diving headlong into an every-man-for-himself mentality. The day would mimic the violence of the night.

The freshly infected would roam the streets as well, their skin still thick, their minds not completely broken.

Guns, water, and food would become the new forms of currency and security.

Unfortunately for Lance, he had none of the above.

He tried to call some of his old friends from college and past jobs, wanting to speak with someone he knew on a personal level, knowing this might be his last chance. He even dialed Liz's number, but didn't get an answer. Everyone was busy trying to survive.

Or they were already dead.

A series of the ear-piercing shrieks came from the floor above him, making him flinch. He changed his mind, deciding that talking on the phone would be too loud. Those things looked strong enough to tear through the damned floor and get him.

Lance grabbed his laptop and went back to the recliner, fighting the urge to

peek outside again. He spent the next hour typing a long, heartfelt email to everyone he could think of. His thoughts, desires, and regrets poured out in an avalanche of emotion. Apologies to those he'd done wrong or fallen out of contact with.

He typed a fond story about one of the first dates he took Liz on. They decided to give ice-skating a try, even though neither had ever done it before. Liz twisted her ankle and Lance bruised his tailbone. Despite the pain they suffered through as they left, their smiles and laughter pushed them closer together and they hadn't parted since.

Until recently, anyway.

He included her and many of her relatives, asshole parents included, in the recipients' list. If his dying breath rapidly approached, then he needed to get everything off his chest.

Wanting someone, anyone, to understand what drove him to the man he became. He needed his acquaintances to understand that he regretted the things he never accomplished.

Liz should know that he didn't blame her for the collapse of their marriage. He was still furious over the Don situation, but he left that out of the email.

Once he got going, the words flew across the screen, his thoughts pouring out in a cathartic stream. When he finally hit send, he felt lighter, less frightened.

Whether or not anyone would ever read it, he didn't know. That didn't matter though. Everything he'd thought of himself, his friends, and his family finally came out in semi-coherence.

He closed the laptop and reclined again, lacing his fingers behind his head, content.

That wasn't to discount his fear of a painful death in the night. The thought of it loomed over his head.

He closed his eyes, hoping to fall asleep. After a few minutes, he gave up and went back to the window, making sure to turn off the television again.

The fire from the gas station still burned, though it had diminished significantly. No one milled about in the street. They were either hiding, or dead.

He spotted a few of the infected as they dashed past lights, or illuminated

windows. They often reacted to sounds, converging on the source of a scream or a pistol shot. Lance watched their movements, seeing how disorganized and aggressive they were. Fast and feral.

He had no chance of fighting them off.

When the sun came up, he would leave his apartment and never return. Staying there only delayed the inevitable.

Taping up the window yet again, Lance decided to watch the world burn on live TV.

The night passed with agonizing sluggishness.

Lance stood by the window as the first rays of sunlight crested the skyscrapers.

He observed the infected slink into shadows, retreating to unknown locations, hidden away from the sun.

His backpack hung from his shoulders, the kitchen knife clutched in his hand. The pain in his side had ebbed through the past few restful days. His foot ached when he used it, but there was little he could do about that now.

After removing his homemade door barricade, he peered into the hallway, making sure no surprises awaited him. He slipped out, starting to lock the door behind him before realizing that he didn't need to because he would never return.

Every door in the hallway was closed and locked, save the last one on the left. Lance eased it open and immediately jerked his head away, fighting back a retch. Across the apartment, a window was smashed in, glass littering the carpet. A body rested on the floor in a crimson puddle. Most of the flesh and muscle were torn away, glistening white bone exposed.

So much of the torso and head were missing that Lance couldn't tell if it had been a man or a woman. The idea of going inside and ransacking the place to look for a gun or food made him queasy.

He moved on, taking the stairs down to the next floor. None of the doors

opened.

Success finally came on the first floor. Lance stepped into an apartment that was palatial compared to his. Granite counter tops, stainless-steel appliances, and a multitude of bedrooms filled out the space. LED TVs hung from walls beside watercolor paintings.

Lance went straight to the master bedroom and rooted through the closet, looking for a gun. Finding nothing, he dumped the dresser drawers on the floor. He grinned at the vibrator that spilled on the plush carpet. The corners of his mouth turned south when he didn't find a pistol anywhere.

Though he knew better than to waste precious time, he stopped to look at the pictures hanging on the walls. Most of the images framed a family of four. Lance walked away before he started to feel guilty for ransacking their home. He grabbed bottles of water from the fridge, jamming them in his bag.

A meat cleaver in the utensil drawer replaced the flimsy knife he already had.

The front door of the building was propped open, a cool breeze blowing through. The wind carried the stench of death.

Lance stepped into the bright street, squinting against the glare from the sun. He stood at the top of the stairs leading to the sidewalk, waiting for his eyes to adjust. From the window of his living room, he'd seen what remained from the chaos of the night, but being in it, standing in front of bloody streaks and overturned cars, made it more real.

He maneuvered through a real life version of Dawn of the Dead.

Dabbles and splotches of blood coated the stairs, like a human bomb detonated there during the night. Though he'd seen many people die last night, Lance didn't see a body for quite a while. Did the infected take the carcasses with them? Store them like leftovers for a meal during the day?

A few people poked their heads out of windows and doors, looking up and down the street, fear etched into their exhausted faces.

Lance walked across the street to the building adjacent to his own. The locked front door barely slowed him down as he smashed the glass portion of it out with a brick. He thought back to the man with the shotgun who'd been killed last night, and mentally counted how many flights up he had been.

“Four, I think,” Lance mumbled to himself.

This building, slightly nicer than his own, had an elevator, which he took to the fourth floor. Blood streaked the walls and worn carpet, the place looking closer to the hallway of a slaughterhouse than an apartment building. The blood-saturated floor squished under his shoes as he sneaked toward the end of the hall, knowing the man’s place had a window that faced the street.

An open frame stood without a door, pieces of wood and bent hinges hanging along the left side. The door, smashed inward, rested on the floor of the apartment.

Lance hesitated at the entrance, wondering if the cannibalistic mutant might be hiding inside somewhere. A windowless bathroom might be dark enough to keep it from wandering too far from such a great source of meat. There could be dozens to hundreds of people still left inside the building.

His fingers blanched as they tightened around the handle of the cleaver. Sweat stung his eyes, though the temperature hadn’t risen above seventy yet. Tiptoeing around the door, wincing at the pain in his foot, Lance entered.

The place smelled of old pennies.

A woman’s body, pale and stiff, sat on the floor, resting against cherry cabinets. Thick blood soaked through her shirt, having run from a gaping wound in her neck. Her eyes were round ovals of shock and pain.

The living room had a heavy stain on the carpet, lines of scarlet on the walls and ceiling. Small chunks of flesh rested against the front of a couch, but the man’s body was gone. A trail of blood ran up the wall and out of the shattered window.

Christ, they’re strong.

The shotgun lay on the floor against trim that used to be white. Lance maneuvered around the majority of the gore and grabbed the gun, wiping away drying smears of bodily fluids.

He worked the slide until he emptied the shotgun, counting four shells on the floor. After reloading, he searched the rest of the living room, looking for more ammo. He found two boxes in the master bedroom and stuffed them into his rapidly filling backpack.

The top shelf of the mirrored closet held small bottles of protein shakes and three boxes of energy bars. He took those too, having to throw out a couple pairs of underwear and socks in exchange. After drinking down one of the shakes, he tossed the empty carton back into the closet and went to the bathroom. Some extra bandages and a tube of Neosporin found their way into his bag.

Lance said a small prayer in front of the dead woman before leaving the apartment.

Holding the shotgun in his left hand gave him a sense of security he hadn't felt since leaving the hospital. If a group of those things came upon him, he knew that he wouldn't stand a chance, but he felt reasonably sure he could deal with one. Maybe two if he got lucky.

A few people walked down the street when Lance exited the building. Most of them looked bewildered, walking in random directions, scrounging through flipped cars and discarded purses. Some were aggressive, running down the sidewalks, swinging pistols around and shouting for everyone to stay away from them.

A freshly infected man shambled down the center of the street, muttering about how thirsty and hungry he was. Lance steered clear of him, making sure to head in the opposite direction.

Traffic clogged the streets, empty cars stretching across lines and sidewalks. An entire intersection ran red. Lance thanked whoever was listening that he hadn't been around to see this massacre.

Two motorcycles roared up the cluttered sidewalks, slowing when they hit the traffic jam, working their way through before thundering away. They made incredible progress, and Lance liked the idea of using a bike, but he wondered how far they would get. And what happened if they were in an accident? Good luck finding a doctor to fix your broken leg.

Still, he would give it a shot if he actually knew how to ride one.

By noon, the looters came out in full force. Lance shook his head as he saw people carrying TVs and grabbing iPads from stores.

The world is ending and idiots are still worried about playing their Xbox on a 60-inch smart TV.

How long would it be until people realized that anything beyond bullets and food was just dead weight?

Lance paused at another intersection. The traffic light clicked above him, uselessly going through its progressions. Birds perched atop empty cars. A young couple carried a child of five or six past him, watching him with cautious eyes.

Two fast food restaurants on the left had people shuffling in and out, the sidewalk congested by a small crowd. Lance wondered who was in there frying the food. Shuttered businesses lined the street to the right. A used car lot was ahead, some of the vehicles damaged.

He kept going straight, walking down the center of the road to avoid people who came out of random buildings. Those who noticed his gun gave him a wide berth.

A large gathering of survivors clogged the road ahead. Lance moved to the sidewalk, wanting to listen in on what a man in the center of the group shouted.

“If we stick together, we can fight them off!” The man, gray-bearded and crow-eyed, stood on a milk crate, waving his arms toward the crowd. “We need to take over this building here!” He pointed to a swanky complex to his right. “If we get a gun in each apartment and post guards at every entrance, we can stay alive!”

Lance grunted.

“They come at night, so we need to rest in the morning and scavenge in the afternoon!”

The crowd nodded and shouted the occasional ‘hell yeah’.

Lance continued on, knowing these people wouldn’t make it through the night. He envisioned them lighting up the building like a Christmas tree, thinking it would help them see the horrors lurking in the night.

All they would do is draw them in like moths to a flame.

The afternoon went by too quickly. Lance checked his watch obsessively.

He needed a secure place to hole up for the night.

Dozens more of the infected came out as the day progressed, their numbers growing at an alarming rate. Most of them had deep gouges in their arms, or bite

marks on their torsos. Lance diverted his path every time he encountered one, leaving the killing to the tough guys that seemed to be coming out of the woodwork.

Shortly after four, Lance passed an Italian restaurant. He paused, mid-step, staring at himself in the reflection of the unbroken front window. “Ottaggio’s, eh?” Lance asked himself. “I wonder if you have a decent walk-in freezer, Ottaggio?”

The front door was locked and he hesitated when he went to smash the small window in it. The more inconspicuous the place appeared, the less likely someone would come in looking to steal his stuff. He walked around to the side, his limp worsening from the long day’s walk.

A small window nestled six feet above the ground toward the back of the building. Lance grabbed a metal garbage can and flipped it over, rocking it side to side to ensure it was steady. He stepped on the can, hoping it wouldn’t fall over, and peered into the window.

Inside was a vacant kitchen, stainless surfaces everywhere. Large burners and doublewide refrigerators lined the right wall. Metal counters and a long, slender window were on the left. The dishwasher and sink sat just below the window.

He broke the glass pane with the butt of his shotgun, grimacing as the sound reverberated down the alley. Two men walked by the entrance of the restaurant, but neither looked over at Lance. He let out a sigh of relief, glad that he didn’t draw any attention to himself. The stock of the gun brushed away the remaining pieces of jagged glass as he cleared the small space as best he could.

Tossing his backpack and gun inside, Lance wormed his way into the window, grunting and huffing as the sill pushed against his sore ribs. He squirmed until his waist rested on the wood, placing his hands on the cold metal sink, hoping to lower himself enough to get his feet through.

A gunshot cracked outside.

Lance flinched, his hands slipping on the steel surface, and plunged inside. He rolled at the last second, shoulder crashing against the sink, arms instinctively protecting his head. His ass landed on unwashed dishes, his back

bending the slender faucet arm at a ninety-degree angle.

“Well, that sucked.”

Though his shoulder cried out from hitting the edge of the sink, he started to laugh. After everything that happened over the past few days, he never could have imagined that this is how he would have wound up—crammed in a sink at an Italian restaurant.

He laughed harder as he imagined how silly he must look. Tears ran down his cheeks as he howled, trying to push himself out of the basin, but failing because his continuing chuckles zapped his strength.

Only the darkening sky sobered him.

After climbing out of the sink, and rattling too many dishes in the process, he slung his pack over his shoulder and grabbed the shotgun, finger caressing the trigger. He left the lights off as he shuffled through the place, making sure no one else decided to squat there.

The dining room was split in two parts, one with a bar and smaller bistro tables, and the other for formal dining. The restrooms sat in the middle of a short hallway that led into another kitchenette space. Lance hadn't worked in a restaurant since high school, but this looked like a kitchen prep area.

Cutting boards and knives covered the counters. Italian bread, wrapped in plastic, filled shelves. On the other side of the kitchen stood a metal door with a lever-handle on it.

Lance smiled. “Ka-ching.”

The door clicked as he pulled the handle, sliding it open. Darkness lay beyond. He found the light switch on the outside of the freezer and flipped it up. The overhead bulb flickered to life, a dull yellow filling shelves and crates.

Empty meat hooks hung in the back of the room. Most of the food was gone, likely taken by the owners when the plague hit.

“Shit.” Lance pursed his lips. He would have enjoyed cooking some beef in the morning.

The temperature inside was the same as the restaurant. He supposed the owners turned the freezer off to save on their electric bill, in case this whole end-of-the-world thing blew over.

Walking inside, Lance pounded on the walls, listening to thuds, trying to gauge how thick they were. A vent in the top of the freezer had a diameter of only four or five inches, not enough for anything to climb through. He hoped that would give him a solid supply of air through the night.

The door was six-inches thick, the outside made with metal of questionable strength. Lance rapped his knuckles on it, wincing at the hollow quality of it. He knew it wasn't solid steel, but probably only had some kind of insulation in between the sides. The hinges held strong when he pulled on the top of the door, not giving at all.

Locks on both the inside and outside handles lifted his spirits a bit. At least they wouldn't be able to just open the door.

The thought gave him pause—how intelligent were these things? They'd been human only a few days ago, but their behavior closely mirrored a wild animal.

With rabies.

Even still, did any problem-solving ability linger? Could they use the simplest of tools, like a door handle or a hammer?

Lance dropped his bag to the floor of the freezer and ventured back to the kitchen prep area. By the entrance, he found a smaller area with timecards and cash registers. Stacks of folded, white tablecloths sat upon several shelves. He loaded his arms with them and went back to the freezer, laying them on the floor to soften the surface. After two more trips, he had decent bedding.

The front of the restaurant grew darker by the large window and glass door. Dusk drew near. People fled the street, running inside apartment buildings and a 24-Hour Copy store. Lance flipped tables and placed them against the door and in front of the window, hoping to block any light that might shine out.

Tomorrow he would spend more time shoring the place up, but for now, he had to hurry. He found several serving trays in the kitchen, which he tried to use to block the window he'd climbed through. They were too small, wanting to fall through into the alley.

He ran back to the prep room and grabbed loaves of bread from the racks, racing to the kitchen and stacking them in the broken window. This was

probably moronic, but he felt better knowing that something couldn't see in if it just ran by.

A security light above a door on the other side of the alley flashed on as he stuffed the last loaf in.

The wail of the hungry echoed through the streets.

On his way back to the freezer, Lance grabbed another loaf of bread, a butter knife, and several small packets of jelly. A large box of candles sat beside the cash register and he took two, snagging a lighter from the counter.

Gunshots in the street rattled the windows out front. Lance paused, listening. Screams of suffering followed.

Lance pulled the freezer door shut, securing it from the inside by sliding a pin down through the lock. He left the light off so he could sleep.

He lit the candles and placed them by his makeshift bed. Jelly spread across bread, washed down by bottled water, comprised his dinner.

He sat in the semi-darkness, slowly chewing his food and listening to the muffled sounds of the massacre outside.

Lance peered over the tables, through the front window.
The morning brought blood. The sidewalks ran red with it.

Dozens of the newly infected roamed the street, muttering to themselves. Others, more advanced in the stages of madness, stared out of sightless, shriveled eyes.

Only a few normal people dared to run past the window. Those who did drew attention to themselves, chased by the blind, insane hunger of the Xavier virus.

Desperation washed over Lance as he observed the destruction of Pittsburgh. The unwinding of civilization.

Soon, the infected would outnumber the survivors. When that happened, it was over.

The end of it all.

Lance ran his hands through his sweaty hair, wondering if the end had already come and he just wasn't willing to accept it.

He quietly stacked more tables atop the others by the door and windows, blocking the rest of the view to the outside.

By the bar, he spotted a television mounted above a long mirror. He switched it on and then rummaged through the built-in refrigerator under the granite bar top. Oranges and limes, bagged and sealed, were on the top shelf above bottled beer and Red Bull. Bags of pretzels rested beside the fridge.

Lance grabbed handfuls of the food and moved to the other side of the bar,

sitting on a stool. His back was still tight from sleeping on the hard floor of the freezer. The tablecloths softened his bedding a bit, but it was a far cry from a mattress or even a couch.

Warnings scrolled across a static background on the television.

Most of the channels had similar programmed images. He finally found a local station that broadcasted a live feed. WTAE was on the air, a fair-haired woman standing in front of the camera, speaking from printed papers.

Lance peeled an orange and sipped on a Red Bull.

"...spreading at an alarming rate. Most of our crew is gone. Only Jim, an intern here at WTAE, and I remain. We've locked ourselves in the studio and we're going to continue broadcasting as long as possible. Internet access is still up, so we're pulling reports from the BBC and Al-Jazeera as best we can."

Their bravery impressed Lance. He tipped his high-octane drink at the screen.

"The death toll is off the charts. In the United States alone, it's expected to be in the millions. The hundreds of millions. Satellite feeds of New York and Los Angeles show hundreds of thousands of infected loitering in the streets and filling the highways. The military has been overrun in most areas. They've managed to retreat in only a few others. President Adams flew to Paris overnight..."

Lance glowered at the television. "Must be nice to have a private escort of Marines flying you around when the shit hits the fan. Fucking coward."

"Our studio here isn't actually in the city of Pittsburgh, but adjacent to it. We can tell you with full confidence that the Xavier virus has spread well beyond the city limits. Wilksburg, where we're located, is decimated. The city itself is in ruins. Large towers of smoke are rising above the skyline. It looks like there are at least a dozen fires burning, maybe more. We haven't gotten word from anyone about the military's containment plans around the city, so we don't know if they're still there or not. If anyone watching has information they can share, please call us now."

A phone number appeared on the screen a few minutes later, clumsily fixed over the broadcaster's face.

“I guess Jim the intern doesn’t have the hang of the switchboard yet,” Lance said. He devoured two oranges in rapid succession. Leaning over the bar, he pulled another Red Bull from the fridge. Several nights of restless sleep left him exhausted, the caffeine giving him a much needed perk.

Something hit the front window. Lance flinched, spilling his drink on his shirt.

He sat on his stool, silent, jaw clenched, angry with himself for not bringing the shotgun from the freezer.

After thirty seconds, he slid from the seat and quickly retrieved his weapon, leaning it against the bar beside him.

Turning his attention back to the television, Lance tore open a bag of pretzels and watched.

The woman on screen stared off to her left, nodding her head and jotting a few notes. She turned back to the camera.

“We’re getting phone calls from viewers now. Most of the checkpoints outside of the city have been overrun. We just received word that the main hub at Heinz Field is still operational, though they’re overflowing with people trying to flee the city. If you can get there, it might be your best hope. Several callers have reported seeing helicopters throughout the night and several convoys of troops engaging the infected.”

Jim shouted something unintelligible from off screen.

“Jim, that’s ridiculous. I—” She paused, shaking her head as he continued to speak. *“We’re being told that a roving group of some sort of militia is executing people in the streets. Anyone they suspect is infected with the Xavier virus is being shot onsite. God help us all.”*

Lance finished his breakfast and cleared the bar, if for no other reason than to keep his new home moderately clean. He went back to the window and inched one of the tables aside.

Fewer of the crazies roamed about, but there were enough that he didn’t feel safe wandering around out there.

“Shit.”

If being out at night meant certain death, and the day was now populated by

those on the brink of insanity, what options did that leave him?

If Heinz Field still had a military presence, perhaps that might be the best place for him. He didn't like the idea of being around that many people, making noise and drawing attention, though he wasn't sure if that would be any worse than sleeping in a freezer.

Even if he wanted to go there, he couldn't visualize how he could travel that far of a distance. It was several miles away, through blocked streets and waves of Xavier victims.

"...BBC is reporting that the Xavier virus has been detected in Africa and Asia."

Lance returned the table to its proper spot by the window and leaned against the wall, staring at his shoes.

If the disease had spread to Asia and Africa, it would only be a matter of time before everyone had it.

They were witnessing an extinction event.

No place would be safe.

No escape.

The restaurant wasn't a bad place to be. He had some food and water. Booze if he wanted to get shitfaced and walk outside, putting the kobosh on his problems.

A metal freezer that, while not the most secure of places, would keep him relatively safe. Or so he hoped. Lance peered around the dining area by the bar.

"This could work."

As long as he stayed tucked away, not giving up his position, he could stay there for a while. He would have to venture out for food at some point, but he would cross that bridge when he got there. The one thing he refused to do was ration his food to the point where he would become weak and sluggish.

Going out to loot a grocery store when he could barely walk was a death sentence waiting to be carried out. No, he would eat as much as his body needed and figure the rest out.

The occasional gunshot rang out as Lance straightened the faucet head in the kitchen and ran hot water from the tap. He took his clothes off and scrubbed at

his body with dish soap, running individual limbs under the water to rinse. Fresh underwear and socks from his pack went on, along with a clean shirt he found in the waiter's station. Neosporin and a new bandage covered the wound on his foot.

The woman and Jim disappeared from the television, replaced by a scrolling warning to stay inside. Lance hoped they were only napping.

Rummaging through the place as the morning went on, Lance found some eggs and bacon inside the fridge in the kitchen. His mouth watered at the thought of throwing it in a skillet, but hearing the mumbles and wails outside kept him from doing so. He remembered the Xavier victim in the hospital sniffing the air, as if it smelled him approaching.

Under the cash register, he found a hidden box of Butterfingers that he tossed in his pack.

As noon rolled into the later parts of the day, Lance's eyes continually wandered back to the exposed front of the restaurant. How long until those things burst through? He figured the freezer could withstand one, maybe two, of those things beating on its door. If a group of them came through, however, he'd be finished.

The bread in the window came down, replaced by wireframe shelving that Lance wrapped in tablecloths. He taped it to the wall with a large roll of duct tape he found in a closet by the bathroom.

He stepped back and inspected his work. "Better than bread."

Two shots of Jack Daniels at the bar, and Lance turned in for the night.

With the door locked, he lit his candles and settled in his hard bed. He flipped through a Glamour magazine he'd found rolled up in a waitress' apron.

He threw it into the corner ten seconds later. No matter how limited his reading choices were, he just couldn't get into that kind of stuff.

That night proved the loudest yet.

The concussive blows of heavy ordinance shook the building, waking Lance every few minutes. Barrages of machine gun fire erupted occasionally, strafing by as if it belonged to a helicopter.

Around midnight, a massive earth-shaking explosion rocked the freezer,

knocking over one of the racks.

The banshee-like wails never ceased.

Lance rolled over and covered his head with a tablecloth.

Morning came too soon and Lance staggered to the bar, exhausted from the night's festivities.

"Red Bull and pretzels again. Yay."

The young newscaster had returned, this time sitting in a chair, her blouse buttoned incorrectly, hair disheveled. She nodded to Jimmy, who must have stood behind the camera.

"Are we on? We are? OK. Hello again, Pittsburgh. It was a long night for all of us, and Jim and I are still getting our bearings under us. As you probably noticed, the military pushed into the city last night. Helicopters cut down hundreds of those infected by the Xavier virus. Artillery rained from the sky." She cleared her throat. *"They've destroyed at least two hundred bridges in the city. We're still getting calls about other detonations, but that's what we know so far. If you were planning on using any of the major bridges to escape, you'll need to come up with a different route."*

Lance held his head in his hands, the fatigue not going away no matter how much caffeine and sugar he pumped into his body.

"We've also been told that the military forces on the ground were completely overrun. There are thousands upon thousands of infected roaming the city. The BBC is reporting on its website that the Xavier virus has landed in Western Europe. Coupled with several military defeats in U.S. cities, it's likely that we're on our own now. Help will not be coming."

The large window on the front of the building smashed inward. Tables toppled over. Men shouted.

Lance spun from the stool, scooping the shotgun up and jamming the butt of the stock into his shoulder.

Three men, clad in camouflage, climbed through the window, scrambling over the tables. Each held a rifle, one that was bolt action.

"Stop," Lance shouted, sighting the nearest man.

They hesitated, eyes round circles of shock.

Shrieks came from behind them.

“They’re coming!” The man on the left, broad-shouldered and bearded, stepped forward. “They’re right around the corner!”

“I don’t give a shit.” Lance swung the barrel toward him. “Not my problem.”

The foremost man, white-haired and older than the rest, held his free hand up. “Unless you’re going to kill us *and* them, then you better let us inside.”

Lance looked over all three of them, his options running through his mind. As far as he could tell, he didn’t have a whole hell of a lot.

“How many are chasing you?”

“Half a dozen,” White Hair said.

“Shit.” Lance lowered his shotgun and stepped forward. “Help me get these back up.”

They watched him as he grabbed the leg of a toppled table.

“Hurry up!”

The men dropped their guns to the floor and stacked the tables in front of the window, wordlessly working to hide themselves.

Lance grabbed the remote from the bar and muted the television, turning his attention back to the front of the restaurant. The men stepped backward, lifting their guns again.

A shriek came then, shrill and close.

Too close.

Footsteps slapped at the pavement on the sidewalk. They stopped directly in front of the window. Lance heard panting, barely above a whisper, rasping on the other side of the tables.

His ears pulsed as his blood pressure spiked.

Another cry from the infected startled them, making Lance wince at its shrillness.

The footsteps continued on, the sound dying out as the infected moved away.

Lance blew out a long sigh, realizing he’d held his breath the entire time.

“Thanks, mister,” the youngest of the group said. His straight black hair touched his eyebrows. His baby-smooth face and lack of stubble betrayed his youth.

“You have seriously fucked my hiding spot.” Lance lowered the shotgun, but kept his finger by the trigger. “Why are you guys wearing camouflage? You aren’t military.”

The oldest man, obviously the leader by the way the others deferred to him, moved to the bar and grabbed shot glasses. “We were part of a militia.”

As he poured four shots of vodka, Lance moved between them and the back of the restaurant, not wanting anyone going near his pack. “They talked about you on the news. You’re running around executing people.”

The man offered him a full shot glass.

Lance shook his head.

All three of them threw back the liquor. The youngest coughed, grimacing at the aftertaste.

“We only shoot the infected. Why wait around until they fully mutate and then come for us?” The leader poured another round. “We were controlling the plague better than the goddamn government was, that’s for sure.”

“Were?” Lance asked as he watched them pound booze.

“Yeah,” the old man said, slamming his shot glass down. “They hit us last night like a freight train. We had seventy-five men at sundown last night. We’re all that are left, I think.”

The teenager stood in front of the TV, watching the silent newscast.

“They came from everywhere.” The broad-shouldered man plopped into Lance’s stool. “Out of sewer grates, from buildings, hell they even jumped from the back of a tractor trailer.”

White Hair nodded at the teen. “That’s Mike. The big fella is Tony, and I’m Ralph.”

“Lance.”

“You own this place, Lance?”

“I do now.”

Ralph smiled. “I hear that. Owners are probably dead or infected. You all alone in here?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for not shooting us,” teenager Mike said.

Lance stayed quiet, still assessing the men. He understood their logic for shooting the infected, but he still had to consider them dangerous. They were shooting people in cold blood, sick or not.

“You seem tense, Lance.” Ralph placed his rifle on the bar. “We didn’t even know you were here when we broke through the window. We’ve been fighting or running for most of the night and we needed a place to hole up and hope they didn’t catch us.”

“I understand that, but it doesn’t mean I have to like the fact that you just broke down one of the things between *me* and *them*.”

“Fair enough.”

“What happened with the military last night?” Lance took a tentative seat on a stool at the far end of the bar. “I heard the bombing and shooting, but I didn’t look outside.”

“They got their asses kicked, same as us. We watched a whole goddamn battalion get taken out.” Ralph looked at the vodka bottle again, his head cocked at angle as if contemplating another drink.

Lance hoped he wouldn’t have to take the booze away. He didn’t need a confrontation. “It sounded like they were hitting the city with artillery.”

“They were.”

Lance stayed quiet for a bit, trying to think of a way to get them out of the restaurant. They seemed nice enough, but that didn’t mean much. Lance had never been the best judge of character. He married Liz after all.

“You said that you *think* you’re all that’s left of your group. You didn’t see the rest die?”

“We saw a lot of ‘em die, but not all.” Ralph scratched his chin. “They caught us so off guard that our group split in two. Everyone in our half got taken out.”

“How did you manage to survive the night with all of those things out there?”

“When the military showed up and started raising hell, we used the distraction to climb in the back of a burned-out bus. They didn’t find us until twenty minutes ago, when some numb nuts had to take a leak.” He glared at the

boy. “We’ve been running from them since. Don’t have enough ammo to shoot ‘em all, so we ran.”

Mumbling came from outside as another infected shambled by the restaurant. The men waited for it to pass.

Tony whispered, “Nice place you have here; ‘cept for the smashed window anyway.”

Lance stared at him. “How long are you boys planning on hanging around?”

“Easy now,” Ralph said. “We’re just hiding for a bit. The day at the most. There’s a rendezvous point that our group is supposed to meet at if we get split up. That’s tonight, so we’re out of here by then.”

All three of them turned and looked at him, waiting for him to acknowledge their continued presence. Lance didn’t see too many outcomes that didn’t end with him shooting them, or vice versa. Unless they were telling the truth, and just wanted a place to squat in for the day.

“Fine. Don’t know how much longer I can stay here anyway. Most of the food was gone when I got here. We should move to the back of the restaurant. There’s less of a chance of them overhearing us back in the kitchen.”

“Lead the way.” Ralph picked up his rifle and laid it against his shoulder. “You’re the boss.”

Lance turned and headed to the kitchen, wondering if he was making a mistake.

Pain exploded in the back of his head.

He fell to his knees, shotgun clattering across the floor.

The world went black.

Throbbing pain ran from the top of his skull to the yolk of his shoulders.
Lance groaned as his eyes fluttered open.

Racks ran up walls on either side of him. Bags of bread lay on the floor around his shoulders and arms. He was in the freezer.

His arms wouldn't move.

Head pounding, Lance craned his neck, saw his arms tied to his torso.

Backpack gone.

"Son of a—"

"Welcome back," Ralph said. He walked through the prep kitchen and stopped at the open door of the freezer, leaning against the frame. "How's your head?"

"Hurts like hell." Lance's eyes swiveled around, investigating the freezer, hoping to spot his shotgun.

"Looking for this?" Ralph reached around the doorframe to the outside of the freezer and pulled the shotgun into Lance's view. He held it by his waist, shaking it slightly, as if he were showing a treat to a dog.

"Why are you doing this?"

"You have things that we want."

"If you'd asked—"

"Don't bother, son. You wanted us out of here ASAP. I don't blame you, of course, but that doesn't jive with what we need."

Lance closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Haven't decided that yet." Ralph scratched his chin. "Tony wants to kill you. Mike's a little squeamish about the idea, seeing as you aren't infected."

Tony hollered from the dining room, "Just kill 'em and get it over with!"

"Why the hell would you kill me?" Lance tried to keep the panic from his voice. It didn't work.

"That's what I said." Ralph shrugged his shoulders. "He seems to think that you'll come after us. I don't see how you'll get out of the restaurant when we leave. Not like you have a gun or anything."

"You want to leave me here, tied up and defenseless? And you were trying to convince me that you're the good guys?"

"Good is a relative term nowadays, I'm 'fraid."

Lance struggled against the tape, getting nowhere. His hands tingled from blood loss because of the cinched bindings.

"Easy now, Lance. You aren't getting out of those."

The teen walked into view, drinking a beer from the fridge. "If we just leave him here, won't he turn into one of those things after they get at him?"

"Boy, it ain't even noon yet and you're gonna be half in the bag. Put that goddamn beer down." Ralph cocked an eyebrow as he turned back to Lance. "You do have a point though. If they don't kill him, just bite him, we'll have another one of those damned things coming after us."

Mike put the beer down on the counter. "I think I'm changing my mind—Tony might be right. We should put him out of his misery."

"See? Even the kid knows I'm right," Tony shouted.

"Tony! Keep it down, for Christ's sake! We broke the window out front, remember? Why don't you just invite the whole city to come in here?" Ralph rolled his eyes. "See what I'm dealing with, Lance?"

"I feel so bad for you," Lance said. "Why not just let me go? I'll walk out of here right now. You didn't tell me where your rendezvous is, or whatever you called it."

Ralph studied him for a moment. "Come here, Mike."

The young man stepped beside his leader.

“You just said that you didn’t like killing someone who wasn’t infected. What changed your mind?” Ralph put his hand on Mike’s shoulder.

Mike said, “It just doesn’t feel right leaving him here for them. Seems more humane to put him down.”

“What the hell is wrong with you people? Why do I have to die at all? Just let me go!” Lance’s voice rose, getting louder and higher, paralleling his fear.

“Quiet. You make a ruckus and you’ll leave me with no choice.” Ralph looked back at Mike. “Maybe we could just let him go. What do you think of that?”

Lance stared at them in disbelief. His life was being used as a tool to teach the boy some kind of warped lesson. These people were mad.

“That sounds good, but what if he wants revenge? Or what if he gets turned in a day or two and we have one more monster trying to kill us?”

“So what do you think we should do?” Ralph asked.

“I don’t know, Grandpa.” Mike refused to meet Lance’s eyes, even though he openly discussed his fate. “Killing him still feels wrong.”

“So why did you say that you think Tony is right?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted to hear.” Mike’s shoulders slumped.

Lance shook his head. This family’s morality was somewhere right of Hitler. Who suggests killing a man because they think it will please their grandfather?

“You people are seriously fucked.”

Ralph’s face flashed with anger. “One more word, and—”

A crash of splintering wood came from the bar area. Tony roared, low and deep, like a growling war cry.

“They’re in!” Ralph spun the boy around and pushed him through the prep area, taking Lance’s shotgun with him.

Lance struggled into a seated position, knowing that he had to get out of the freezer and escape the restaurant somehow. If the Manson family managed to fight off whatever horror came through the window, they’d probably kill him. Then again, if he did get outside, the victims of the Xavier virus would do him in.

His head pounded.

He rolled onto his left hip, scooting his feet under him. Using the shelves to steady himself, he stood up, the tape around his arms skewing his balance.

Lance's shotgun boomed from the front of the restaurant.

They're going to bring every one of those damned things down on us.

Quietly moving through the prep area, Lance peeked around the corner. Two of the infected climbed over toppled tables, hissing and clawing at the air.

Ralph cocked the shotgun and fired again.

The buckshot blew away a portion of the neck from one of the infected. It gurgled, blood arcing through the room in arterial spray. It fell onto an overturned table, arms sliding across the wood finish, movements weakening.

Tony sighted the second beast with his rifle and shot it dead center in the chest. It collapsed on the floor after two more steps, death spasms racking its limbs.

Lance spotted his pack leaning against the bar. He had no chance of grabbing it on his way out. Not that he could carry it with his arms taped down anyway.

The teenager pulled a large hunting knife from a sheath on his hip and stepped toward the neck-shot infected. "I'll finish him."

He stuck the toe of his boot under its shoulder and flipped it over. As it rolled, a stream of blood shot from its neck, splashing across Mike's face.

He stumbled backward, gagging and wiping at his face. His knife clattered to the floor.

Lance searched the countertops beside him. A serrated kitchen knife sat on a cutting board, the blade six inches long. His fingers brushed it as he leaned backward against the stainless counter. The men in the other room shouted incoherently as Lance slid the knife's handle into his palm.

He flipped it with his fingers, aiming the blade straight up, hoping to cut his way free. The sharpened edge touched the tape, but struggled to slice through the surface.

Chancing a look into the dining room, Lance saw Ralph and Tony standing in front of Mike, wiping blood from his face.

"Am I going to be infected?" Mike cried, struggling against their hands. "Am

I going to die?”

Only Tony still held a gun. Lance's shotgun was on the bar, too high for him to grab with his arms bound.

He tried to cut the tape again, but only managed to make a quarter of an inch knick. It would take him a considerable amount of time to free himself. Time he didn't have.

Ralph stood behind the bar, pouring water over Mike's face. Lance was at a loss. If he tried to run past them, Tony would shoot him in the back. If he stayed put, they'd surely kill him, or leave him tied up, which would amount to the same thing.

A woman stepped in front of the broken window, arm raised, pointing at the group of men, the shriek of the infected reverberating around the room.

Tony spun and aimed his rifle, blowing the back of her head out. Gray matter misted the air as she crumbled to the sidewalk. Another of Xavier's victims appeared, climbing through the window, vascular muscles tensing. Tony carefully sighted him, pulling the trigger.

The gun clicked.

“Fuck!” Tony stuffed a hand into his pocket, fetching a single, brass bullet. He fumbled with the bolt action on his rifle, the bullet slipping from his grasp and falling to the floor.

It came for him, jaws gnashing, blind eyes flopping in their sockets.

Lance sprinted forward, his balance thrown off because of his bound arms. His gait awkward, head straight in the air, Lance crossed the dining room in a few steps, hopping over a toppled table.

Tony's jaw dropped when he saw him. He hesitated for a moment, fingers brushing the bullet on the floor, watching as Lance ran past.

The infected woman cocked her head toward him as he lunged past her. She paused, snarling and hissing, before continuing toward Tony.

Lance hopped from one overturned table to the next, high stepping like a running back drilling through tires in practice. He jumped through the window, struggling with the proper speed and distance because of his bindings. His foot snagged the lower part of the window's frame, pitching his body forward.

Flesh and concrete collided. Pain ran up Lance's already sore side, shoving away rational thought as he groaned on the sidewalk. Flash bulbs filled his vision.

Rolling to his back, Lance blinked hard, trying to get his eyes to focus. The swirling clouds of color before him slowly straightened out, centering on another infected stumbling toward him.

"Oh shit." Lance pushed away the pain, lifting his legs and rocking to his upper back. He kicked forward, throwing his weight to his feet and rolling into a squatting position. He hopped up, foot throbbing, breath coming in ragged gasps.

It shambled in his direction. It was several days into the mutation, its skin thinned, eyes gone, language forgotten.

Lance spun on his heels and fled, moving as fast as he could without the benefit of swinging his arms. Half a dozen of the infected were ahead, various stages of the disease afflicting them.

They converged on him.

Lance slowed to a crawl, head swiveling around as he looked for an alternate escape route. He spotted an alley to his left, running between two tall buildings. He went for it, knife still in his hand, hoping that nothing waited for him in the shadows beyond.

The alley was dark. Graffiti lined the walls. Overflowing garbage cans festered, flies buzzing around their summits. He rushed past them all, trying to soften his footfalls, hoping they wouldn't follow him.

A chain link fence, ten feet tall, stopped him thirty yards in.

"Double shit!"

Normally, Lance would have chuckled at his ridiculous swearing. Now he was too busy trying to keep himself from freaking out to appreciate the devolution of his speech.

He spun around, intent on running out of the alley at full speed, fleeing this trap before it could snare him.

One of *them* stood in the entrance. Its head cocked back, mouth distended in a shriek of rage and hunger. It was a woman, or used to be, with the tatters of a dress hanging from thin shoulders.

Lance's heart hammered in his chest like a piston. He turned back to the fence and frantically kicked at the bottom, hoping he could dislodge the corner and wiggle through. After three solid swings of his leg, it still wouldn't give.

Using the knife in his hand, he sawed at the tape binding him. The blade dug into his forearm from his spastic swipes, drawing blood. Lance ignored it, moving faster, praying that something would give.

The infected woman stumbled closer, arms stretching out, hisses escaping parted lips. Blind eyes swayed in their sockets as she drew near. Her right leg hitched as she walked, a gouge in her thigh apparent as she stepped closer.

Lance backed against the fence, putting as much space between them as he could. He stared at her, the realization that he wouldn't get through the tape in time setting in.

Yellowed teeth and a wagging tongue drew his gaze. She lifted her arms, claw-like hands tensing.

When she was less than five feet away, he lunged forward and kicked her in the stomach with all his might. The force of the blow knocked her backward, ass crashing against a garbage can. Lance teetered sideways, struggling to retain his footing. His shoulder collided with a door to his right. Painted black, and set half a foot in the wall, the door had gone unnoticed by Lance as he'd run by it.

He pushed away from it and gave it a kick by the knob. It didn't budge. The jolt in his leg made his hip ache and he feared that if he kicked it like that again, walking would become too difficult.

Struggling against the pain, he ran for the street, missing the woman's outstretched hands by inches. He shot past her, hope welling in his chest as he saw the open end of the alley.

Two more of the infected moved into view, silhouettes shrouding their features. They both had thick shoulders and moved faster than the woman did. They'd been infected several days before she had.

LANCE SKID TO A STOP, knowing he couldn't fight two of them without the use of his hands. Even if he wasn't bound, he didn't believe he could defeat them.

He spun around, taking a step back to the fence, intent on ramming it with the full weight of his body.

The woman was back to her feet, already moving toward him again.

Panic took over.

The idea of being eaten alive like so many others spurred him on. He accelerated toward the woman, lowering his shoulder, hoping to knock her over once again.

A piece of cardboard, slick with dew and other unspeakable liquids from the alley, slid underfoot as he stepped on it. It shot out from under him, throwing his balance off. He careened to the side, falling past the woman and landing on a pile of trash by the end of the alley.

Papers and bags cascaded from the top of the refuse mound, covering his head and shoulders as he squirmed to get back up. The knife fell from his hand, disappearing somewhere amidst the garbage.

He rolled to his back, garbage still blocking his vision. His heels pushed against the ground as he frantically slid backward. Shaking his head did little to clear away the debris as he braced himself for the first bite.

Hisses and snaps came from feet away.

Their feet slapped against the pavement, closing in.

Something thudded, wet and hollow, like a melon dropped on the floor.

Lance stopped moving back and gave his head and shoulders one final buck, tossing a torn magazine from his face.

The infected woman was less than three feet away, hands reaching for her next meal.

“Fuck you.” Lance watched as she moved in, focusing on her veined face, ignoring the movement of the others behind her.

Her head detached from her shoulders, flying sideways and bouncing into the pile of trash.

Lance blinked. Confusion, exasperation, and pure joy mixing into a unique emotion that he couldn't have described if he wanted to.

The body stood in place for a moment, the fingers still curling in grasping motions. It crumpled then, falling straight down in a jangle of limbs. Blood

spurted from its neck, soaking a section of the brick wall.

A blonde-haired woman stood beyond the collapsed body of the infected.

She held a two-sided axe, similar to the kind seen on the covers of medieval books and video games. Gore and blood dripped from the blade.

A black leather skirt covered half of her thighs. Her exposed midriff, visible because of a torn, gray shirt, had a small tattoo just under her belly button. Thick, dark bracelets wrapped both wrists. She had at least a dozen earrings in.

Lance blinked again.

“Get up, dumbass,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. “I can hear more of them coming.”

Lance opened his mouth to reply when a shriek from the street cut him off. He rolled onto his shoulder and tried to get his feet under him, but the garbage he lay on hindered his movements.

“I can’t.”

She turned back to him. “Why?” Her makeup-lined eyes squinted. “Are you bit?”

“No, I’m tied up.”

“What?” She looked down the alley again.

“I’m tied up. Help me get on my feet.” Lance noticed the open door behind her for the first time. It was the same one he’d tried to kick in.

The woman stepped beside him, axe held in front of her. “Just because I saved your life, doesn’t mean I’ll hesitate to cut your head off if you fuck with me.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Don’t say anything, just move.” She grabbed the top of the tape running around his shoulders and pulled, giving him enough momentum to get to his knees.

Lance stood up, seeing the dead bodies of the two infected men a few feet away. A long, gruesome gash split the shoulder and neck of one, running halfway into its chest cavity. The other had a twist in the abdomen, the hips turned to an unnatural angle, as if the spine and stomach muscles no longer held things in place.

“Jesus.” He couldn’t believe that he hadn’t heard her killing them while he thrashed around in the garbage.

The blonde-haired woman moved to the door in a hurry, standing by it and waving him to follow her. “Hurry the hell up.”

Lance didn’t need a written invitation.

They stepped into a dimly lit hallway. A film covered the walls and ceiling, like a heavy smoker’s house that never had a good cleaning.

The woman closed the door behind them, jamming a 2x4 into metal brackets on either side of the frame.

“That explains why I couldn’t kick it open,” Lance said.

“Shut up and move.”

The sparse hallway led into a broad, cluttered room.

Tubes and vials and glass beakers sat atop wide tables, interconnected in a maze of home chemistry.

The place stunk. Soot covered most of the surfaces.

“Christ, you’re a meth dealer.” Lance stared at the chemistry equipment. He’d only seen this kind of setup on *Breaking Bad*.

“Keep walking, dickhead.”

“Considering you just saved me from being eaten alive, you aren’t very nice.”

“If you want this axe jammed up your ass, then by all means, keep yapping.”

The woman marched him past the makeshift lab and into an equally dirty living room. A torn couch rested against the far wall with a kitchen chair beside it. Xbox controllers sat atop a scuffed coffee table. A large, flat-screen television was on the floor opposite the furniture, cables snaking around it in a wire mess from hell.

“Sit on the couch.”

“I’ll get AIDS if I go anywhere near that thing.” Lance eyed a large tear in the cushion. Stuffing, discolored from god-knows-what, puffed out of the gash.

She push kicked him in the ass, sending him sprawling face first into the couch. Dust puffed up, filling his nostrils and dusting his skin. He coughed, shaking his head like a dog trying to shed water from its fur.

“Who are you?” the woman asked from behind him.

Lance managed to turn around, sliding into a seated position with a grimace. “You didn’t need to do that.”

She stood in front of him, raising the large axe up and down, letting the handle near the blade smack against her palm.

“I’m Lance.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“What do you want to know, my social security number?”

“Why don’t we start with why you’re tied up?”

“If I tell you, will you cut me free?”

“Probably not.”

Lance sighed, letting his head lean back against the rear cushion before snapping it away when he felt the grody surface against his neck. “I was staying in a small Italian restaurant down the road when a couple of guys broke in and tied me up. They were arguing over whether or not to kill me when a couple of the infected broke in. I ran out while they were busy fighting.”

She continued staring at him.

“I didn’t get far, obviously, because I can’t use my arms. A few of those things were in the street so I ran into the alley to get away. I didn’t know it had a damn fence in the middle of it. They cornered me and that’s when you came to my rescue. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Some guys tied you up and *then* argued about whether they should kill you? That doesn’t make sense.”

“They were crazy. Said they were part of some militia that’s going around and killing anyone who is sick. Their leader was trying to make some kind of bizarre point to a teenager, forcing him to decide whether I lived or died.”

“And then you decided to lead them to my door. I had a pretty good spot picked out, but now they know where I am.”

Lance inspected the room. “You call this a good spot? You’re living in a meth lab.”

“No, I’m living in a hidden, secure space.” She sat down on the chair, resting the axe on her lap, wiping the blade with a filthy, crumpled paper towel that

languished on the floor. “You can’t be completely useless, I guess. You have managed to survive this long after all.”

“Uh, thanks?” Lance wondered what direction this conversation was headed. The last people he’d met decided that he needed to go. He hoped she wouldn’t come to the same conclusion. Her concern and distrust made sense, given the present nightmare the world found itself in, but he hoped that she wouldn’t throw him outside again.

She sat in silence for a while, cleaning the axe and tossing the bloodied paper towel into the corner. “Lance, I’m going to be honest. I’m wrestling with the idea of cutting you loose. Are you some kind of psycho rapist?”

“No.”

“If you try anything, Betsy here will be very upset.” She patted the double-edged axe like she would a pet.

“Betsy? You named an axe?”

The woman stood, went back to the room with the chemistry set, and scrounged through a dresser on the far side. She came back a moment later with a small knife.

Lance focused on keeping his breathing steady as she stepped in front of him, holding the knife in front his face.

“Keep something in mind while I cut you free: I killed all three of those Vladdies out there without breaking a sweat. I won’t even feel bad about having to kill you.”

Never taking his eyes from the blade, Lance nodded. “You have my word.”

She leaned her axe against the wall, telling him to stand up and turn around. After he complied, she cut the bottom of the tape and worked her way up. The edge of the knife cut through his binds with relative ease.

Blood rushed into Lance’s hands, stinging his flesh like a thousand needles. She stepped away from him when she cut through the last loop of tape and picked the axe up again. Her suspicious look made Lance feel guilty, though he hadn’t done anything to her.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. He struggled to move his arms away from his sides, the adhesive still sticking to his shirt and skin. Hair pulled from the roots of his

forearms as he tore pieces of tape off. Following her lead, he threw the waste into the corner, thinking that it didn't make the place look any worse.

He turned back to her, rubbing his sore arms and hands, shaking them out as he tried to get his blood flowing again.

She leaned against the wall, weapon held at the ready in front of her.

Lance pointed at it. "Where the hell did you get that thing? It's straight out of Dungeons and Dragons."

"Found it back there in another room." She bobbed her head toward a door by the television.

"You found Paul Bunyan's axe in a meth lab?"

"Drug dealers are crazy, what can I say?" She sat on the arm of the couch, giving the appearance that she was relaxing. Lance could see from the thin line formed by her lips and ramrod straightness of her back that she was anything but.

Lance followed her lead, sitting in the chair. He felt relatively at ease in her presence, though he knew that was stupid considering what he'd just gone through with the goons at the restaurant. "What's your name?"

She didn't respond.

"Should I just call you Blondie then?"

"Cassandra."

"Nice to meet you, Cassandra."

"No it isn't. The world has gone to hell in a hand basket, I just beheaded an ill woman, and we're locked in a meth lab. This is anything but nice."

Lance laughed in spite of himself. "You said that you killed gladdies—why do you call them that?"

"Vladdies. What the hell sense does 'gladdies' make?"

"About as much as Vladdies."

Cassandra lowered the head of the axe to the floor and rested it against her leg. She pulled a small rubber band from her hair, letting the blonde strands fall to her shoulders. "I call them Vladdies because of Vlad the Impaler."

Lance scratched his head. "Have you been testing the meth? You aren't sounding so rational right now."

“Vlad the Impaler is the man Dracula is based off of.”

“You’ve definitely been smoking some good shit. You’ve gone completely off the rails.”

She ran a hand through her hair, fluffing it a bit. Lance noticed for the first time how attractive she was. Her arms and stomach were toned, her skin tan. Her hair was so bright that he thought she might have colored it. The style of her clothing and accessories left something to be desired though.

He averted his eyes before she could notice him checking her out.

“This isn’t an advanced physics problem,” she said. “Those things out there are vampires. Dracula was the first vampire in fiction and he was based on Vlad the Impaler. Vladdies.”

“Wait a minute. *Vampires?*” Lance looked her over again, thinking he’d fallen in with another lunatic. She carried around an axe, believing she was a vampire slayer of some kind. “You can’t be serious.”

She held up her hand, fingers splayed. “They hate light.” She curled one of her fingers to her palm, leaving four remaining. “They drink blood and eat flesh.” Another finger down. “They’re fast as shit and strong as an ox. If you’re bitten, you turn into one of them.” She paused with only her pinky finger still in the air. “OK, that’s all I have, but you get the point.”

“You actually think these are some kind of mythical creatures? The CDC thinks it’s a prion disease. I was in the hospital when all of this fell apart and I heard it right from the horse’s mouth. This was a terrorist attack that’s spreading a plague. They aren’t vampires.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes and smacked her forehead with her palm. “No shit, Sherlock. I don’t think Bela Lugosi is stalking the streets in a fucking cape. Who says vampirism has to be supernatural?”

“I—” Lance stopped himself. She had a point. Even if they weren’t vampires in the tradition sense, the description did sort of fit. Kinda.

“See what I mean? Vladdies.”

“I’ve just been thinking of them as infected.”

“Infected? Nah, that’s what zombies are called. Vladdies.” She nodded as if she’d just finalized the discussion.

Lance said, “Vladdies it is, I guess.” He pointed at her axe again. “So, do you think you’re Blade? You’re running around and killing vampires with a big axe. It’s actually kind of ridiculous to say it out loud.”

“I’m a blonde woman, not Wesley Snipes. Besides, I couldn’t do a karate kick to save my life.”

“You’re pretty good with the axe though.”

“I grew up in the country. Chopping wood for fires was what I used to call Thursday night.”

Lance looked at her short, leather skirt, tattooed stomach, torn shirt, and over-the-top bracelet things. “You grew up in the country?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She dismissed him with a wave. “I have a unique style. I don’t usually wear a shirt like this, but I tore it climbing through a window yesterday and haven’t found a new one yet.”

“It’s unique alright.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t need to take shit about my clothing anymore. Fashion and culture are shitsville, amigo.”

She had another point. Besides, why was he complaining when he had an attractive, half-naked woman in front of him?

“So what’s your deal, Cassie?”

“Don’t call me Cassie. I hate girly shit.”

“Cassie is girly shit?” The angry wrinkles in her eyebrow told him it was. “Cass then?”

“Fine. Anything but Cassie. And what do you mean, what’s my deal? I’m living like a rat and trying to stay alive, just like everyone else.”

“I haven’t talked to anyone in days, so I guess I’m just looking for a little conversation. Unless you’re planning on booting me out the door, we might be in here together for a bit.”

Cass shrugged. “I’m an Aries, I like to read, I’m a failed artist, and I had to kill my best friend two days ago.”

“Oh.” Lance knew that everyone who was still alive probably had similar details in their short-term history, but hearing it put like that made him feel sorry for her anyway. He hadn’t killed anyone close to him, but his wife ran out with

an old friend just as the apocalypse hit.

“Yeah. Shit happens when the world ends, I guess.”

“I take it your friend was sick?”

“She was my roommate, and yeah, she caught the Xavier virus. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Cass grabbed a handful of her long hair and inspected it. She grabbed the knife from the floor and starting cutting chunks out of her hair.

“Uh, what the hell are you doing?” Lance asked, stunned. He considered trying to stop her, but he didn’t want to take an axe to the face.

“Like I said, fashion and culture are gone now. There’s no reason for me to have long hair because it looks good or it makes guys want to fuck me. Now it just gets in the way when I’m trying to run or save some dumbass in an alley.”

“Dumbass?”

“Yeah. You’re a dumbass to me until you prove otherwise. Being wrapped in tape and lying in a pile of trash while Vladdies are about to chow down on your legs makes you a dumbass.”

And Cass scores another point.

“Fine. I’ll concede that I wasn’t in the best of positions when you came by. *But* I have managed to stay alive until now so that has to count for something. You said so yourself.” He watched as she continued butchering her hair, hoping his wit would elicit a smile or a giggle.

It didn’t.

Concern over her state of mind lingered with Lance. He’d never encountered a woman who would purposefully chop off all of her hair. Liz obsessed over hers.

“And I’ll go on record to say that I never wanted to have sex with a girl because of her hair.”

She sliced another handful away, dropping it to the floor. “Please. Blonde hair is a homing beacon for guys. They see it and coming running like the dogs that you are.”

Lance stayed quiet for a bit, not wanting to argue with her about the merits of men while she carved large chunks from her hair. Her comment about men being

dogs made him wonder who had screwed her over in the past. Then again, who was he to try to figure out someone else's life? His was nothing short of a disaster.

She finished what could loosely be described as a haircut, and looked at her reflection in the blade of the knife.

"That's better." She dropped the knife onto the large pile of hair and leaned back in her seat.

"It, uh, doesn't look so good." He stared at the uneven, gouged appearance around her head. All of the front strands stopped above her eye line. Some were only an inch long, while others on the back or sides were close to four.

"Who gives a shit? It's not like I have to impress anyone at the gym anymore."

Though she made him more than a little nervous, Lance liked her attitude and view of things. She came across as a no-nonsense kind of woman. Still, he decided not to push about the hair or the comments about his sex.

"So why did you come out and save me? That was a big risk."

"To be honest, I almost didn't. I heard you kick it or run in to it, but I thought about just staying inside and ignoring you."

"What changed your mind?"

"Guilty conscience? I don't know. Just seemed like the right thing to do. You should feel privileged by the way. I've heard worse things happening to people in the past week and I never went out for them."

"Thanks, honestly." Lance leaned back and peered through the doorway by the TV. "What's back there? Other than a weird armory with crazy axes. Any food?"

Cass stood up, axe in hand. "Let's go. You walk in front though. I haven't decided to fully trust you yet."

Lance stood and crossed the room, looking through the door. Another dim hall extended away from it with three doors on either side and one at the opposite end.

"Go to the door on the right," Cass said.

He eased it open a moment later, wincing at the chemical odor that came

from inside. After fumbling around the wall for the light switch, Lance stared at unmarked barrels and boxes upon boxes of lab equipment.

“Jesus. You don’t know who lived here?”

“Nope. I came running down the alley, looking for a place to stay at dusk last night and found the door unlocked. No one’s come back since.”

Jugs marked paint thinner lined one of the walls, each with a nozzle built into the container.

“This is a major operation,” Lance said. “If someone comes looking for it, they’re probably going to be armed to the teeth.”

“Anyone who would cook meth at a time like this is a moron. Those things have a hell of a sense of smell.”

Lance remembered the thing at the hospital sniffing as he approached it from behind. “I’ve noticed.”

They went to the room on the other side of the hall and opened the door. A bedroom, filthy and ragged as the rest, lay beyond. Twin beds, both without sheets, sat in the middle of the room. Dark stains ruined the carpets. Yet another door led to a small bathroom in the back right corner.

A pistol rested atop a thoroughly scratched dresser.

“Don’t even think about it,” Cass said. “The pistol stays right there.”

“Shouldn’t we move it to the front of the apartment, in case someone comes back?” A wave of relief ran through Lance at the sight of the gun. Nothing was more valuable anymore.

“Don’t worry about it. Go further inside.”

A chest resided next to the farthest bed, hidden by the height of the mattress. At Cass’ request, Lance opened it, whistling at what lay inside.

“Who the hell were these guys?”

Machetes and long knives with curving blades filled the chest. Sheathes and belts wrapped around some. The handle of a katana was visible at the bottom, the business end hidden under the mound of weapons.

“I have no idea, but they had some crazy shit in this apartment.”

Lance reached for a leather harness of some kind when he felt Cass nudge his shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see what this leather thing is.”

“Slowly.”

“You need to relax. If I wanted to make a play for a weapon, it would have been the pistol.” He pulled the object out, holding it in front of him. It had long straps with a few buckles and clasps for adjusting the lengths. A sheath-like harness had a large opening at the top, with a small one on the bottom. A flap of leather with a snap on it could cover the upper hole, keeping whatever was inside from spilling out.

“I think this is a harness for that axe.” He held it up to the blade, making sure the weapon would fit. “Yeah, this is so you can carry it around on your back.”

She took it from him. “Interesting. Nice find, dumbass.”

Lance ignored her snide comment. “Who makes this kind of shit? I mean, honestly, who would walk around with an axe on their back?”

“I’m going to from now on.”

They went into the last room at the end of the hall. It was a kitchen, barely. Filthy counters and appliances made the room impossible to eat or prepare food in. A refrigerator hummed in the corner. The entire room reeked of spoiled dairy.

Lance said, “I take it there isn’t any food in here?”

“Some leftover boxes of Chinese food that appear to be from the turn of the century.”

“Is that what the smell is?”

“Yup.”

“So why did you just give me this tour if I’m not allowed to touch the weapons and there isn’t anything to eat?”

“Because we’re going to setup some ground rules and I wanted you to see what we have to work with.” She gestured toward the door with her axe. “Let’s go back to the living room.”

“Ground rules? Maybe the first one should be to stop threatening me with decapitation.”

“Maybe dumbasses aren’t allowed to make requests.”

Lance found a sheet of plastic in the meth lab and spread it over the couch. The cover was anything but comfortable, though it kept him from shivering in disgust every few minutes. Cass sat in the chair and watched him.

“Better now, princess?” she asked.

“Much. Thanks for the concern.”

“OK, rule number one is stay the hell away from me. I’ll sleep in the bedroom with the weapons and you’ll stay on the couch. If I hear you anywhere near the hallway or the door to my room, you’re toast.”

“What if I have to piss?”

“Go in a container in the lab for all I care.”

Lance smiled. Cass might be crazy, he hadn’t decided on that topic yet, but she sure was interesting.

“I’m not joking,” she said. “Don’t go back there.”

“Yeah, yeah. What’s rule number two?”

“Follow rule number one.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

Lance shook his head, still smiling. “You’re a weirdo. So what do we do about food? Unless you’re a cannibal, we’re both going to get really hungry in the morning.”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“So there isn’t some master plan you’re working from?”

“I’m thinking about one, but it isn’t finished yet. The first step of the plan, though, is not getting taped up and eaten in an alley like a dumbass.”

Lance grunted. “Does that TV work?”

“Dunno.”

“Wait a minute here. You broke into this place yesterday, but you haven’t actually found any food or even tried the TV? And I’m the dumbass?”

“I’m already starting to regret saving you.”

Lance found a remote stuffed in the couch cushions. The expedition he mounted to discover it was something he’d rather forget. The pizza crusts and condom wrappers stuffed in there came straight from a nightmare.

The cable still worked, a pleasant surprise, and he found WTAE again. The feed from the station was still live though no one stood in frame anymore. Blood covered the desks and flooring.

“I guess Jim the Intern didn’t make it.” Lance cycled through more of the channels until he found another local channel, though no call signs overlay the image.

“Jim the who?”

“Some kids were still broadcasting the news this morning.”

“Oh.”

The new station showed a feed from a helicopter. No one spoke or reported on anything. Hundreds of the infected roamed the streets of Orlando.

“I’m surprised there aren’t more,” Lance said.

“Everyone else is in hiding, has been eaten, or is so far advanced in the change that they can’t be out during the day.”

“Already? Mankind has succumbed in a matter of days?”

“Fucking Vladdies.”

The stream switched to a shot from inside a building, the camera pointing out of the window of a high rise in a city that Lance couldn’t place. Police cruisers, empty and destroyed, filled the area below. Red splashed across everything.

“How can we survive this, Cass?”

“Don’t think we will.”

“So we’re just prolonging the inevitable?”

“Probably.”

They sat and watched the video for an hour or so, the utter devastation never failing to shock them. St. Louis burned. It was an inferno the likes of which Lance had never seen. Flames licked the sky above tall buildings and streets, as if napalm covered the entire city.

“I heard that the country is relatively safe,” Lance said after a while. “The low population means there are a lot of less of the infected... I mean, the Vladdies, running around.”

“And how the hell would we get there? They own the night, and the still-turning rule the day. We’re just a footnote in the Earth’s history at this point.”

Lance thought about it, running through different ideas. Everything he could dream up boiled down to two basic options.

“We could starve to death here in the safety of this shithole, or we can try and navigate out of the city, past all of them, and hide in the forest or the mountains.”

Cass stayed silent for a bit, her fingers rubbing the side of the axe in absentminded swirls. “Starving to death would be less painful. Besides, we can probably steal enough food from the neighboring buildings to last a few days.”

“Maybe. Or we might get killed just trying to cross the street as we search around.”

“Yeah, it’s a maybe. The chances of pulling that off are a lot better than catching a cab and leaving the city. And what’s this ‘we’ shit? There is no we.”

Lance’s grin returned.

“Stop smiling at me,” Cass said, though her voice lacked conviction. “You’re like a stray dog that I’ve fed. I save your life once and now I can’t get rid of you?”

“I sleep a lot and I *never* piss on the carpet.”

Cass’ hard exterior finally cracked. “Dumbass.”

“Look,” Lance said, smile sliding away. “We have a gun and a chest full of swords and other weird shit. If there was ever a chance of us getting out of here, it’s with this stuff. Besides, the last I heard, the military hadn’t lost Heinz Field

yet. Hell, they might be airlifting people out of there. There will be lots of armed men, if nothing else.”

“The military is at the stadium?”

“Yeah. It’s been all over the news—you haven’t kept up on anything?”

“I’ve been a little busy killing friends and such.” Her face stiffened again. “The last thing I saw on the news said they were calling it the Xavier virus. I fell off the grid after that.”

“Well, the military blew a lot of the bridges around the city and setup a few outposts to filter the sick from the exiting population. Apparently two of them have fallen, but Heinz Field is still good.”

“And you think that’s a good way to escape? Going to a place with a ton of people? I can’t imagine how many of those things are attracted there by the lights and noises of all those refugees.”

They discussed it for the next hour, weighing the pros and cons of staying or leaving. The dangers apparent in each decision made it difficult. Lance found himself pushing the idea of leaving the city, even though he wasn’t certain that was the best course of action. He just didn’t like the thought of spending the next couple of weeks in a dingy meth lab without any food.

He found it interesting that he talked about the two of them doing everything together, as if they’d formed a partnership in survival. Cass seemed hesitant about setting off with him, but she didn’t fight it as much as he expected.

Knowing that he might not have to go through this hell alone made Lance push the subject even harder. Having someone to talk to, as tense as some of their encounters were, eased the feeling of isolation he had over the past few days.

Cass went to bed after a while, giving him another warning about going back in the hall. Lance laughed off her threat, though he knew she wasn’t joking.

Leaving the television on, Lance curled up on the plastic-covered couch and watched images of the armageddon until he dozed. Fitful dreams kept him restless, tormenting him throughout the night.

He awoke in total darkness an indeterminate amount of time later, the talons of panic hooking into his mind as he tried to get his bearings.

“Lance, get up!”

“What’s going on?” He sat up, the crinkle of plastic reminding him that he’d fallen asleep in a meth lab. “Why’s it so dark?”

“The power must have gone out while we were sleeping.” Her voice came from down the hall. “I can’t see a thing. This goddamn crack den doesn’t have any windows.”

Lance hadn’t noticed that while getting his tour earlier, but the total darkness surrounding him confirmed it. “Did you see any flashlights or candles in the kitchen?”

“No, but I didn’t go through the drawers or anything.”

“You check in there and I’ll fumble my way through the lab.” Lance got up, holding his hands in front of him like a mindless zombie. He stumbled across the living room, banging his knees against the chair and almost falling over.

Cass’ ransacking of the kitchen filtered through the rooms, followed by her loud swearing as she stuck her hand in something gross.

Lance walked groin first into the edge of the large table holding the chemistry equipment. The air whooshed from his lungs as he bent over, his stomach already flipping from the impact. He grabbed his crotch and turned around, cracking his head off a glass piece of some kind, sending it crashing to the floor.

“You OK?” Cass yelled from the kitchen.

“No!”

“What happened?”

“The table jumped out of nowhere and hit me in the balls.”

“Dumbass.”

The blow sank deeper in his gut. He fought against dry heaves.

Cass continued thrashing the kitchen.

After a minute or so, Lance ran one of his hands across the table, searching for a lighter or flashlight. His other hand stayed on his balls, protecting them from any further impacts.

He didn’t know what he was looking for.

His fingers brushed against tubes, vials, and burners. He continued his

exploration for a moment before backtracking, feeling the burner again. A small knob connected to the long stem, near the bottom. Lance twisted it, hearing the hiss of gas.

Running his hands over the area beside it, Lance felt two, thin metal rods that connected together. He picked them up, squeezing the two pieces together. It sparked, giving him a flash of beakers and bottles.

“Gotcha.” Lance found the Bunsen burner again, surprised at how well he navigated in total darkness. Holding the striker above the business end of the burner, Lance twisted the knob again, gas escaping.

The flame ignited in a quick flash, bathing the desk in a soft glow.

“I’ve got some light in here.”

“Bring it to me. I can’t see a damn thing back here.”

“I can’t. It’s a burner on the table.”

Cass worked her way through the apartment, finally making it back through the living room. She held the pistol in her right hand.

“So I guess that’s the last of the power for, I don’t know, ever?” Lance leaned against the wall, watching Cass.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“We could try to find some candles and bring them back here,” she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

“Or we could see if the football stadium is still safe.”

“How long did we sleep?” Cass walked over to the next hallway, looking toward the barricaded door. “Holy shit, I can see light under the door. We slept through the entire night.”

The lack of power further strengthened Lance’s desire to leave. Slinking around in the dark of the city, scrounging for scraps, didn’t feel like the best way to spend the last few days of his life. Realizing that he would die, and probably soon, made the decision easier, rather than harder.

“Cass, I really don’t want to do this alone, but I’m going to leave. Now. I understand that it’s probably safer here, for the time being at least. Having said that, I don’t want to live like a rat, as you so eloquently put it. If I’m going to

die, then I want it to be while I'm fighting to get to a better life. Living in the mountains without power or running water is going to be tough—maybe impossible. But at least I'll die knowing that I took one last shot. One last shot at not wasting away, doing nothing, like I always have."

"OK," she said with a shrug.

Lance gaped at her. "That's it? OK? I gave that whole speech to try to sway you, and it actually worked? No argument?"

"Nope. Staying in here was bad enough without being in the dark. Not sure why you had to tell me some little story about you wasting your life. Dumbass."

Lance couldn't help but laugh. She even made their agreements difficult on him.

Cass disappeared through the living room again, returning a minute later with a pillow in her hands.

"What are you doing with that?" Lance asked.

"Setting it on fire."

"Can I ask why?"

"So we can see in the bedroom while we grab some knives and my axe."

The pillow burned well, giving them time to get back down the hall. Cass threw the flaming cloth down onto the bed, the mattress singeing from the flicks of flame.

Lance went straight for the katana. He frowned as he held it in his hands, realizing it was a cheap replica. If he hit anything with it, the blade would likely break off. He tossed it to the ground and dug through the chest of weapons.

He settled upon two knives, one long like a machete, and the other shorter with a serrated back, like the knife Rambo always used. Though they would do massive damage against a human adversary, and possibly even the mutating people of the day, the idea of attacking the creatures roaming the streets at night made him want to curl in a ball.

Cass put on the harness for the axe, using the buckles to hold it in place. The medieval weapon went in handle first, the flat side of the blade resting against her back. The leather flap lay across the top.

The mattress lit, smoke filling the smallish bedroom quickly. Cass grabbed a

small pistol holster and clipped it to her belt, which rested unconnected atop her skirt.

“Why do you wear a belt that isn’t attached to anything?” Lance asked. Her fashion continued to astound him.

“Why not?”

“You shouldn’t answer a question with a question.”

“Do you want to stand here and burn to death while I answer all of your questions about the way I dress?” She went to the door, sliding the pistol into the holster. “Come on, dumbass.”

“Aren’t we going to put the bed out?”

“Let the fucker burn. It’ll probably go out on its own. If it doesn’t, then it might act like a bit of a distraction. Either way, we’re burning down a meth lab—the gods will forgive us.”

Lance followed her back to the chemistry set, stealing glances at her butt and exposed lower back, surprised at his inability to stop looking at her.

Six months ago was the last time he and Liz had even touched each other. She’d come home drunk one night, having spent the evening with an old high school acquaintance, and grabbed him out his favorite recliner, taking him into the bedroom. They hadn’t expressed an interest in each other since.

Realizing that his under-utilized sex drive was the likely culprit for his staring didn’t help Lance avert his eyes.

“If I turn around and find you looking at my ass, I’m going to kill you,” Cass said without turning around.

“I’m not,” Lance lied, still staring.

They arrived at the front door, pausing.

Cass turned to Lance. “I hope you’re right about leaving.”

“Me too.” He gripped the machete tighter in his right hand, the solidness of the handle giving him little confidence. “Aren’t you going to get the pistol ready?”

“No.” Cass lifted the axe from its holster by the blade, the process taking a bit more work than Lance would have liked. If she ever needed to get it ready in a hurry, she’d be screwed. “Guns are too loud. These things work off sound for

the most part. I'm only going to use it as a last resort."

"I'm impressed—that's pretty damn smart." He looked her over again, shocked that someone who dressed the way she did could be so quick on her feet. The old adage of never judging a book by its cover came to mind. "Did you say you were an artist before all of this happened?"

"Failed artist. Charcoal mostly." She rolled her shoulders and neck, a faint popping coming from her joints. "Don't do anything stupid when we get out there."

"Failed?"

"I'm not looking to be friends. All I want is to survive another day. Can you handle that?"

Lance put a hand up in surrender. "Sure, sure. Whatever you say, Cassie."

"I told you never to call me—" She stopped when she saw the broad grin spreading across his face. "Dumbass."

Lance grabbed the 2x4 locking the door in place and lifted it free, dropping it to the floor.

The door eased open, light flooding the dank hallway. Flies buzzed around the dead bodies of the three Vladdies in the alley, their skin already darkening from exposure.

Cass snaked through the door, looking both ways. "Clear."

They moved to the mouth of the alley in a hurry, their footfalls silent.

More than twenty of the newly infected meandered around the street, bumping into cars or eating from tipped over trashcans. Two of them came down the sidewalk from the left, moving closer to Lance and Cass than he would have liked. Their skin hadn't changed much yet, though their rambling, bizarre speech gave them away. Cass held a fist up as they approached.

They stood at the entrance to the alley, waiting.

The fresh victims shambled past them, talking to themselves as the madness set in.

Lance wondered why the Vladdies didn't attack each other. Was there something about the infection that spoiled their meat in a way that kept them from cannibalizing each other?

Cass pointed down the street to the right. Lance nodded and they took off at a slow jog, weaving between stalled cars and husks of burned-out trucks.

Two blocks went by before one of the more advanced Vladdies noticed them.

It raised its arm, clawed fingers angled toward them, and shrieked.

Other heads popped up, ears cocking toward the high-pitched scream.

“Oh damn,” Cass muttered.

A group of Vladdies exploded into a gallop, some hunching at the waist, knuckles barely above the street. They sprinted toward Lance and Cass with murderous intent, teeth clicking in anticipation.

Lance took off, ignoring the ache in the bottom of his foot. Cass kept pace, the large axe swaying back and forth as she held it in both arms.

“Bridge ahead,” Lance huffed.

“I see it.”

A rusted suspension bridge waited at an intersection a block away. Twisted metal curled into the air in the middle. Red and white striped sawhorses stood before the entrance with cars jammed around them.

“I think the military blew it up!”

Another shriek came from behind them, closer than Lance expected. Daring to glance over his shoulder, he nearly tripped over his own feet when he saw them closing the distance. Less than ten yards separated them from becoming the mutants’ lunch.

The gap in the bridge became clearer as they approached. Cracked concrete and severed rebar jutted from the point of the explosion.

“Shit, it’s too big for us to jump across!” Cass grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him to the left as they reached the intersection.

They ran past the jam of cars and trucks by the bridge. Blood splattered the windows and seats of some. Doors, ripped from their hinges, rocked in the street, moving slowly from the slight breeze.

The cadence of helicopter rotors came from somewhere above.

Lance looked to the sky as they ran, hoping to spot something close enough to see them. An airlift out of this hellhole might be their only chance.

Cass glanced behind them again, her eyes widening at what she saw. Lance couldn't bring himself to look anymore, fearing what he would see.

"Look for somewhere to hide!" Cass' breath came in ragged gasps as they ran on.

More of the infected wandered in front of brick buildings. The Ohio River roared on their right.

Lance searched the area for a shelter, but nothing stood out. Anything they could quickly break into wouldn't hold back the growing hoard behind them.

The sound of the helicopter drew near as they cut across the street, running down the sidewalk, a row of trees obstructing their view of the river. Other noises drowned under the roar of the rotors.

"Where is it?" Lance shouted.

"I don't know!"

They rushed by another building, the road widening to four lanes, two each way. A thin swath of woods covered both sides of the highway. Lance saw flashes of a large white office building through the trees.

"I think it's over there!" Lance pointed toward the offices.

Automatic gunfire cracked from beyond the trees.

Cass cut across the grass median, and passed through a thin layer of underbrush. Lance followed, wondering what fresh hell they were about to run into.

They sprinted between the trees in a matter of seconds, their feet slapping against the pavement of a large parking lot.

A helicopter hovered by the side of the office building, fire barking from guns poking through its open doors.

Men dressed in black uniforms fled the building, firing short bursts from rifles. The helicopter spun around, giving the soldiers shooting from its side a clear angle at the men.

Lance hesitated at the sight, shocked at seeing so many living people in the same place.

Cass jerked him forward by his shirt. “Run!”

The armed men ran fifty yards into the parking lot and stopped, dropping to their knees and opening fire at the building behind them. A stream of bullets joined them from the helicopter.

Nothing followed them out of the office, so Lance couldn’t see what they fired at. He pressed on, the burning sensation in his quads growing with every step. His lungs spasmed in his chest, threatening to seize if he didn’t ease up soon.

Cass never slowed, her pace even, gait long and powerful.

Lance peered back at their pursuers, seeing that nearly twenty daywalkers followed them in tireless pursuit.

One of the men ahead saw them coming and spun around, screaming at the others. The rest turned at ninety degree angles, rifles butted against their shoulders, and aimed directly at Cass and Lance.

The man in front, large and dark-skinned, shouted something they couldn’t hear.

Lance grabbed Cass’ elbow and yanked her down, diving to the pavement. Skin skidded on rough asphalt, pebbles and dirt digging into scrapes.

Bullets whizzed over their heads, sounding shockingly similar to the near hits Lance had heard in a hundred action movies.

They covered their heads, squeezing against their ears, praying a stray round wouldn’t hit them.

The barrage of gunfire lasted a full ten seconds before abating. The engines of the helicopter continued their onslaught on Lance’s ears.

He slowly lifted his head, seeing the men through a cloud of smoke, their weapons still aimed in his direction. He rolled onto his side, looking behind, seeing Cass do the same.

Bullet-riddled bodies littered the parking lot.

Death throes ran through several, limbs wrenched with spasms.

Two dragged themselves forward, legs trailing behind, blood draining from exit wounds.

The helicopter ascended, rising straight into the sky at a rapid pace, before

banking hard and flying over a residential area. The sound dissipated as it shrank against the blue canvas of sky.

“Are you OK?” Lance asked Cass.

“Fine. You?”

“Scraped my knees a bit,” Lance said as he worked his way to his feet.

“Will you live?” Cass lifted her axe from the pavement. “Should I amputate?”

Lance stared at the men before them. “Might want to be careful about swinging that axe around right now.”

The large man in front stepped forward, rifle still held up. Deeply tanned skin, and a thick, gnarly beard covered his face. Crow’s feet around his eyes. “Who are you?”

“Just two survivors,” Lance said, holding his ground. “Those things were chasing us and we heard the chopper so we ran over here.”

“You’re lucky we didn’t shoot you.”

Cass shifted her weight. “What are you guys doing? We haven’t seen anyone else alive in over a day, let alone a helicopter with a bunch of soldiers.”

“We aren’t soldiers.”

“You’re wearing uniforms.”

Lance watched the other men. They jammed fresh mags into their rifles and scanned the surrounding area with hardened eyes. A few more Vladdies of the fresher, newly minted variety stumbled into view from the other side of the office building.

The men shot them down in a flash.

“Get on your way,” the leader said. “You don’t want to be anywhere near us.”

“I’m not sure I believe that, considering you have a helicopter covering your asses.” Lance peered around, not liking their wide-open position. “What are you guys doing out here anyway?”

The man frowned. He turned around and gave his men a hand signal. They fanned out, taking positions at the corner of the building and behind parked cars.

“Funny how quickly things change. What would have been top secret

information last week is now worthless.” He stepped closer, stopping when he was just out of reach of their bladed weapons. “We’re searching for nests.”

“Nests?” Cass asked.

“Where do they go during the day? We’re checking all buildings with large basements or underground parking garages—anywhere that is dark during the day.”

“Have you found any of them yet?”

“What do you think we were shooting at? Probably two hundred of them in there.”

The building drew Lance’s gaze like a magnet. “What do you do when you find them?”

The man made a throat-slashing gesture.

Cass asked, “You guys are Special Forces, aren’t you?”

“We were. Not sure what you’d call us now. Exterminators, maybe.”

“Who’s giving the orders now? Is the government still functional?”

“We’re still getting reports from various parts of the country, but they’re mostly military or some nut hiding in a bunker with a radio. No one has heard from the president or his cabinet in days. I have no idea who’s calling the shots now.”

Lance listened to the man’s account of the status of the country, or lack thereof, in a passive, unblinking way. Nothing surprised him anymore, and he was shocked at how easily he absorbed the idea that civilization had collapsed.

The man turned back to his men and gave them another signal. One of them reached into a small bag carried on his back and pulled a hand-sized device from it.

“What are you doing?” Lance asked, watching as the man pointed the unknown equipment at the office building.

“Blowing the place to hell. Now get out of here. I’ve already wasted too much time talking to you.” He headed back to his group.

“Where should we go? Who’s left?” Cass called to him as he walked across the parking lot. “Is Heinz Field still safe?”

The bearded man turned back to them once last time. “Yeah. We also have

PNC Park quarantined. Get there soon. They're not going to be able to take many more people."

Lance and Cass watched as the men spoke to one another for a minute before fanning out again and moving down the street, leaving the office building behind.

"I thought they were blowing the place up?" Lance asked.

"Maybe they're calling in artillery or something."

They walked across the parking lot, giving the office building a wide berth, throwing nervous glances at it. A tall church, Catholic from the look of it, sat on the opposite side of the street. Homes, two stories with brick exteriors flanked it, populating the sprawling residential area.

Cass' face, flushed from the exertion of their escape, remained stoic as she watched their surroundings. A sheen covered her stomach and lower back, sweat flowing freely.

Lance pointed to the church. "Maybe we can find some food in there. Don't they usually have kitchens in the basement?"

He hadn't been in a church since he'd graduated high school. His mother, a profoundly religious woman, forced him to go twice a week for the majority of his childhood and teenage years. By the time he'd left for college, Lance decided that he never wanted to spend another Sunday morning sitting in a pew.

And he hadn't. Even when his mother died a few years later, he never felt like attending a service, searching for answers, or explanations of life and death. The pull of religion never took hold of him.

"No idea. I could eat though. It's been a day and a half." Cass switched the axe from one hand to the next. "I'm still not convinced that we shouldn't go with those spec ops guys. They have a whole lot of firepower."

"They want nothing to do with us. And they're jumping head first into a world of shit. Going in the exact opposite direction of them is probably the best thing we can do." Lance hoped he was right. The men had saved their lives after all.

Cass grunted. "Maybe."

The idea of small groups of bad asses fighting back during the day was

intriguing. Though Lance didn't expect the effort to make much of a difference, the idea that someone in charge had half a brain was somewhat reassuring. But what chance did a dozen men have against an entire city of murderous monsters?

They crossed the street, catching the last glimpses of the bearded hard cases as they disappeared behind a sprawling, Victorian-styled home. A handful of infected walked down the center of the road, spouting gibberish to no one in particular.

Lance went up the front stairs of the church, lifting the machete in front of him. Two closed doors, wooden with ornate carvings on the front, stretched nearly twenty feet into the air.

Holding his ear against one of them, Lance listened to the silence beyond. "I don't hear anything."

"Let's make this quick," Cass said. "We have a lot of ground to cover tonight if we're going to make it to the stadium before nightfall."

The doors opened easily despite their bulk, the hinges squealing. A small foyer waited inside. Pamphlets and torn out Bible pages covered the floor.

Lance stood before the threshold of the door, staring at the ransacked space before them, contemplating not going in at all. His shirt stuck to his back, sweat flowing from his pores from running down the street. The cut on the bottom of his foot throbbed.

Wind blew in from the open doors, rustling the papers.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I'm second guessing going in there—what the hell does it look like?"

"It isn't any safer out here than it is in there."

Lance couldn't argue with that. He threw a quick glance into the street and spotted more Vladdies meandering about. No place was safe anymore.

He stepped inside, closing the door behind Cass as she followed.

The stained glass windows in the chapel were smashed, covering the floor in jagged pieces. Blood covered the pews. Streaks of crimson ran down the aisles.

"Jesus," Lance said, his blaspheme echoing in the empty space.

"I don't think Jesus was watching when this happened."

Organ pipes, dented and torn away from the wall, leaned against a balcony in

the back of the church.

A shoe, bloodied and shredded, sat on its side by the front row of seating. It was small, probably a child's. Lance couldn't stand to look at it.

The ceiling, arched and pearly white, added an elegance that stood in stark contrast to the remnants of carnage on the floor.

The stench of death and rot filled the vast chapel.

Cass found a door in the back of the expansive room and went through, axe at the ready. Lance followed, focusing on his breathing, hoping it wasn't as loud as it seemed. They followed a dark trail of gore and congealed blood.

Offices branched off a long hallway. Desks, computers, and filing cabinets decorated the rooms. Crosses covered many surfaces. Some sat on the floor, knocked from their perches on walls and desks.

Light spilled in from shattered windows and open doors. The church was well lit, despite the lack of electricity.

A stairwell waited further inside. Cass stood at the top of the stairs, staring down into the darkness beyond. The dearth of windows ahead cast the lower floor in deep shadow.

The smell of spoiled meat intensified as Lance stepped beside her.

"Why do I get the feeling that we shouldn't go down there?"

Cass said, "No shit."

Lance's stomach rumbled, in spite of the horrific smell wafting from up from the stairs. He hadn't eaten since the day before.

"I'm damn hungry, but not enough for this."

"You aren't going to get an argument from me. Let's get—"

The sound of something scraping the floor came to them then.

Lance's breath caught in his throat. His abs clenched.

A thump, closer and louder.

Cass' fingers blanched as she squeezed the handle of the axe.

Rapid exhalations from below.

Two thuds, closer.

Lance stepped back, wanting to flee, but unable to peel his gaze from the darkness ahead.

A face, distorted and gray, pierced the black at the bottom of the stairs. Empty eye sockets oozed. Thinned hair draped over its scalp, the bottoms of the strands touching pointed, elongated ears.

Grotesque veins snaked through the forehead and cheeks. Thickened bone structure made the jaw and eyebrows protrude.

The Vladdie's mouth opened, exposing canines that extended unnaturally below the other teeth.

It wailed at them, the sound threatening to pop their eardrums. Spittle flew from its mouth, splattering on the steps underneath it.

Cass stumbled backward, bumping into Lance, nearly knocking him over.

Two forearms, muscles swollen and striated, appeared from the shadow. Its fists slammed against the stairs, shaking the floor in a show of rage and frustration.

A series of shrieks answered from the basement below, filling the church with the wails of the infected.

Lance spun on his damaged foot, grabbing Cass' shoulder as he turned, and ran. His feet barely touched the carpeted floor as he sprinted down the hallway.

Cass shouted for him to move faster.

They burst into the chapel, not slowing as they flew past the pews, heading for the large front doors.

More songs from the hungry below reverberated through the floor, filling Lance with a panic he hadn't known since he'd left the hospital.

Cass reached the doors first, grabbing an iron ring in the middle and heaving it open. The wood swung around, bouncing off the inside wall of the foyer, breaking through drywall.

Lance lunged through the doorway, not willing to risk looking back until he felt the rays of sun on his shoulders. He stumbled down the stairs, inhuman shrieks chasing him from the church.

He spun around, eyes glued to the open doorway as Cass huffed beside him.

"My god. Is that what they look like now?" He felt something touch his leg and looked down, seeing his hand shake with such force that the machete tapped against his quadriceps.

Images of the progression of those poor people's mutation flashed through his mind like a flipbook. In little more than a week, the entire structure of their bodies had transformed.

"That's the first one of the nightwalkers I've seen lately," Cass said, her voice hushed as if they might hear her. "It looked more like a gorilla from hell than a human. What chance does mankind have against that?"

"I—"

A scream, only partly human, rang out from behind them.

Lance noticed their surroundings for the first time since escaping the church. He hadn't paid attention to much in his panic.

Over a hundred of the Vladdies filled the parking lot by the office building. More stumbled down the street on either side of Lance and Cass.

Some were fresher, more confused. Others moved with smooth strides, their bodies already twisted and vascular.

"Oh shit." Lance looked back at the church. "Now what?"

"Now we're in deep shit," Cass said, lowering her axe to her side. "I guess the gunfire and the helicopter drew them in."

Fear sapped Lance's strength, rational thought becoming a challenge.

"Should we go back in—?"

The office building across the street exploded.

Bright light stabbed at Lance's eyes.

Ears thrummed, hissing static blotting everything out.

His lungs refused to cooperate, heaving helplessly against ribs.

Heat baked against him in waves, pulsating and searing.

He tried to speak, but couldn't hear himself.

The redolence of burning meat wafted in the air.

He blinked.

His vision cleared slightly. He blinked again, longer and slower. The sky above him came into focus, a black spire of smoke cutting through the blue.

He wriggled his fingers and toes, shocked at the numbness in his limbs, grateful as the feeling abated. His side, still a little sore, tightened as he sat up, grunting, fighting for breath.

Smoking rubble surrounded a crater where the office building had been. Debris filled the parking lot and street. Trees by the highway burned along with nearby homes.

Severed limbs twitched in bushes and rain gutters. Devastated bodies dragged themselves across pavement, blood oozing from orifices. Lance stared at the mayhem, dumbstruck.

Warmth eked down his forehead. His hand came away bloody. A headache settled in as he sat on the sidewalk, church steps behind him.

Several of the Vladdies down the street, further away from the explosion,

worked back to their feet, heads bobbing around in confused anger.

“Cass?” Lance grimaced at the stiffness of his neck as he looked around for Cass. “You OK?”

He found her sprawled on the lawn of the church, partially hidden beside the broad stairs leading to the front door. Blood stained her butchered hair, matting it to her forehead.

“Cass?” Lance took a tentative step toward her, his knees wobbly, unsure. He cast a glance down the street again, watching as another dozen of the infected struggled to get up. They would be swarming again soon, converging on Lance and Cass like locusts.

“Cass, get up!” His ears rang, his own voice’s delivery muted and soft.

Cass didn’t move. Her chest rose and fell in shallow shifts. Her axe lay at her feet, one side of the blade digging into the grass.

Lance wiped blood from his eyes with his forearm as he kneeled beside her. The seeping wound on her head was an inch long, but didn’t appear deep enough to be a major concern. Lance knew from watching the UFC that head wounds bled like crazy, even if they were superficial.

A piece of cinderblock, jagged and rectangular, lay by her shoulder, drops of red covering it.

Grabbing her shoulder, Lance shook her lightly, trying to wake her up. He tapped her cheek, calling her name.

She didn’t respond.

The dazed infected down the street worked their way toward the burning building, their attention temporarily distracted by the flaming debris.

Cass’ eyes fluttered, but didn’t open.

“Goddamn it.” Lance found his machete by the stairs of the church and tied the loop that hung from its handle to his belt.

After sitting Cass’ axe against the stairs’ railing, he bent down and grabbed her wrists, pulling her into a seated position. Her head lolled against her right shoulder, muscles lax.

Lance’s side strained as he lifted her waist off the ground, bending her torso over his shoulder. His legs shook as he took on her weight, his sliced foot

protesting the added stress.

He straightened his back, glad that she was in good shape. If she carried just a few more pounds, he wasn't sure he would have been strong enough to lift her. Even now, with her small frame draped over his shoulder, he didn't know how long his stamina would last.

With his right arm wrapped around her legs, holding her in place, Lance grabbed her axe with his free hand. He knew she would ask for the damn thing as soon as she woke up.

She mumbled against his lower back.

"What? Are you waking up?"

She fell silent, her body still limp.

"Guess not."

The first steps were agonizing. Lance's muscles, energy depleted and sore, strained against her weight. He felt the slightest of stubble on her legs as he held on to them, the miniskirt she wore not leaving much to the imagination.

Though he was carrying a woman through a monster-laden street, the thought of women no longer shaving their legs occurred to him. What would be the point now? There were no pictures to be taken. Catty conversations around water coolers were a thing of the past. Hygiene in general could be little more than an afterthought when you're constantly running for your life.

Lance thought of his own five o'clock shadow and realized how fortunate he was to have slow-growing facial hair. His college buddies used to laugh at his pathetic attempts at beards and mustaches. Now, with a dearth of razors and shaving cream to use, he liked the idea of not shaving every day.

Her waist bore down on his shoulder, its muscles fatiguing before he made it twenty yards. He shifted her weight, sliding her as close to his neck as he could. If he didn't find a safe place to lie low for a while soon, he would need to think of a different way to carry her around.

A fence surrounded the church, separating its property from a neighboring ranch-style home. Lance followed it, leaving the main street behind, knowing that he couldn't carry her and fight off the sick at the same time.

Though he tried not to think about what waited underneath the church, Lance

couldn't keep his eyes from wandering back to the bricks of its foundation. The size and power of what he'd seen frightened him more than anything else did. What could protect them from such fury? Where could they hide that would provide any kind of safety?

He forced his eyes to remain straight ahead, mentally counting the steps until he reached the back of the church. His shoulder ached already, cramps threatening to set in at any moment.

A smaller street lay behind the cathedral. Homes lined the block, uncut grass growing long in the lawns. A two-story home with yellow siding had an SUV parked inside of the living room. Two red trails ran from the open doors of the vehicle, disappearing through the rubble of the crash.

Lance searched the street, knowing that he needed to find a secure place to put Cass down. His strength would fail him sooner rather than later, and he dared not entertain the idea of leaving her behind. She'd saved his life. Even if she hadn't, he doubted that he was cold-blooded enough to abandon her anyway.

Two small bikes with training wheels rested against a curb, tassels flowing in the gentle breeze. Lance fought to keep his mind from imagining what had happened to the children who used to ride them.

Cass moaned against his back again, but remained limp. He patted her leg, mumbling a hollow reassurance.

"Think, damn it, think!" Lance turned right, walking down the center of the street. He walked around the cars sprawling across the two lanes.

Stepped over congealed puddles of blood and tissue.

The sick stood in the disheveled yards, staring at vacant homes. Two of them walked after Lance, but he lost them in a tangle of wrecked cars, hiding behind a jack-knifed eighteen-wheeler.

After another hundred yards, he had to shift Cass to his other shoulder. The relief in his right arm and the side of his neck nearly brought him to tears when he sat her down on the hood of a Chrysler Crossfire.

A shriek from behind a row of brick homes startled Lance, but he couldn't see the Vladdie it came from. Knowing that he couldn't afford to rest, he switched the axe to his fatigued arm. Cass slid down the hood of the car after a

few tugs, her bare thighs squeaking against the metal, and draped over Lance's other shoulder.

Blood still dripped from her lacerated scalp, but at a slower pace.

Lance plodded on.

The road bent left, a few small shops and an ice cream vendor filtering in amid the homes. The stench of spoiled milk wafted from the abandoned freezers inside the small shack.

"A chocolate-dipped cone would go really fucking good right about now." Lance patted one of Cass' hamstrings. "You can't have any though. We need to keep you light in case I need to carry you again."

Sweat drenched Lance's shirt, the cloth sticking to his skin. His left shoulder sagged under the weight, his arm burning from the exertion.

Fear nibbled at his thoughts. If he didn't see something soon, what would he do? How would he protect her?

The sun, though a few hours from setting, ebbed ever closer to the horizon. If they didn't find a reinforced structure of some kind by then, they'd be a late evening snack for the horrors that roamed the night.

The patter of distant gunshots rang out ahead. Lance squinted, but couldn't see where they came from.

A branch of PNC Bank, where Lance had accounts that were now worthless, stood beside the road on his right. The glass front doors were smashed out, no doubt from someone hoping to score some easy cash. Why people didn't realize that money was as pointless as the accounts that once held them, Lance couldn't understand.

Paper printed with the portraits of presidents held no value anymore.

More gunfire ahead.

Closer. Much closer.

Sounded like a shotgun to Lance.

Grinding his teeth, Lance picked up his pace. The idea of dealing with anyone else today felt worse than running from the freshly infected. People were too unpredictable. He could use Cass' pistol, but his arms shook so badly now that his aim wouldn't be worth a damn.

His breathing grew labored, involuntary grunts escaping him.

Men yelling, at least two, made his heart race even faster.

Beside the bank, sitting under a roof covering the drive through, was an armored truck. Its front bumper, dented and scratched, pushed against one of the brick structures covering the bank's pneumatic tubes.

The passenger door hung open.

Hope bloomed in Lance's heart despite the agony his muscles felt.

The voices came again, louder.

Lance swiveled precariously on his wounded foot, twisting around to get to the armored truck. His eye caught movement down the street, giving him pause.

Two men ran into view, firing desperate shots from their hips as they ran toward Lance. They maneuvered around a crashed Silverado, shouting frightened commands at each other. Shotguns held in their hands and ammo belts across their chests, Lance wondered why they needed to run. They had enough ammunition to fight off quite a few of the daywalkers.

Then he saw them.

Dozens of them.

A small army of Vladdies, still early in the mutation, followed the men. More than half ran with ease, the clumsiness of the first few days of infection gone, the hunger taking over. Several were naked, their bodies distorted and pale.

"Shit!" Lance started forward, pushing off his bad foot, grimacing at the pain. He went as fast as his strained and exhausted muscles would allow. His shoulder threatened to dislocate under Cass' weight.

He peered back at the men as he halved the distance to the truck.

One of them, younger and less fat, shouted something unintelligible at his cohort.

The other man, rather than responding with words, racked the slide on his shotgun and shot his friend in the stomach.

Cries of shock and pain echoed through the neighborhood. The gut-shot man fell to all fours, a hand across his destroyed midsection. His attacker ran past him.

Jesus! He just shot that guy to use him as a distraction.

Lance peeled his gaze away just as the Vladdies closed in on the wounded man. His screams urged Lance to move even faster.

He reached the front of the armored truck just as the blood-curdling agonies died out.

“Hey! Hey you! Wait for me!”

Lance didn’t look back, realizing that anyone who would shoot their friend to help themselves wasn’t the kind of person he needed around. That and the man had an entire platoon of the infected hot on his heels.

The cabin was empty, save for dried blood on the seats. A keychain hung from the ignition.

Lance grabbed the open door and started to hoist Cass up to the seat when he paused, wondering if the bulletproof windows could stop the nightwalkers. They were strong enough to withstand gunfire, but what about the continuous blows of a dozen monsters? Once they went inside, it could be days before an opportunity to escape would present itself.

“Shit!” Lance staggered around to the back of the truck, finding the doors locked. He tossed the axe to the ground.

“Hmm?” Cass shifted on his shoulder. “Whazzit?”

Ignoring her, Lance dropped to a knee on the hard surface of the drive through, the jolt sending bolts of pain into his joint. He lowered her to the pavement, skirt sliding up her thighs as his arm stabilized her descent. A flash of black panties caught Lance’s attention as he fought to his feet and wobbled back to the cab.

The armed man closed in, less than fifty yards away, slowed by his age and obvious fatigue. Death followed closely behind him, shrieking and gnashing.

“I said wait!”

“Fuck you!” Lance shouted as he climbed into the truck.

He pulled the keys from the ignition and wriggled backward, shoulder aching with every movement. He jumped to the ground, stopping just long enough to lock the doors of the cab before running to the back again. They didn’t need the gun-wielding asshole getting behind the wheel and doing something stupid while they were stuck in the back.

The shotgun boomed behind Lance as he turned the corner. Pellets ricocheted off the armored vehicle, missing him by less than two feet.

“Dumbass?” Cass lifted a hand to her head. Her eyelids fluttered open, confusion filled and dreary. “What are you shooting at?”

Lance fumbled with the keys. “Some asshole is trying to kill us. No big deal.” He stabbed a key at the hole in the door, but it didn’t fit. The next one slid in and he turned it, hearing a loud thunk as the lock opened.

“Where are we?”

Opening the door, Lance held a hand out to Cass. “Come on! There’s a whole street full of Vladdies bearing down on us.”

Cass took his hand, groaning as he jerked her to her feet. “Easy, dumbass—I have a helluva a headache.” Her words slurred as she spoke, eyes still cloudy.

Lance didn’t argue with her. He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around, shoving her toward the open door. She put her foot on the first of two steps leading into the back of the truck, but her movements were lethargic. Knowing they were out of time, he knelt down, placed his hands under her ass, and pushed as hard as he could.

Her light frame flew into the back of the truck, landing with a thud on the metal floor.

“Don’t touch my ass, you stupid mother—”

Lance grabbed the open door, about to pull himself inside, when he felt the touch of cold metal on his neck.

“Step away from the door,” the man said.

“We can—”

“You said ‘fuck me’.”

“I watched you shoot that guy.” Lance licked his lips. He caught Cass’ gaze, saw her eyes clear when she spotted the shotgun.

“Let him go, hillbilly.”

Dozens of feet clopped across the pavement by the front of the truck. Lance knew they had seconds before the daywalkers took them.

“Shut up, bitch. I’ll—”

Lance grabbed the Rambo-style knife from the sheath on his hip and spun

around. His right elbow caught the barrel of the shotgun, shoving it aside as it roared. The deafening blast went off by his ear, filling his head with a high-pitched ringing.

He continued spinning on his heel, coming face-to-face with his would-be murderer. They locked eyes as Lance drove the ten-inch blade into the man's sternum. The razor-sharp edge slid in with surprising ease, stopping only when the hilt jammed against skin.

The air exploded from the man's lungs, his eyes widening, mouth falling slack.

Warmth ran over Lance's hand. He stared at the man's face, forever etching his features into his memory. Deep lines across his forehead. Dark hair, graying at the temples. Slight belly hanging over his belt.

Lance pulled the knife free.

Red-tinged saliva spilled over the man's lower lip.

The first daywalker appeared around the corner of the truck, grabbing at the dying man's shoulders, sinking its teeth into the exposed flesh of his neck.

Lance stepped away, bending to grab the axe from the ground, and lunging for the back of the truck.

Cass grabbed the back of his shirt as he climbed in, pulling him clear of the door. Hands grabbed at his trailing feet.

He kicked them away, twisting around in time to see Cass boot one of the infected in the face. She slammed the door shut.

The back of the truck went dark.

They sat without speaking for a while, listening to the screams of the man outside. He lived for quite some time, pleading for death. It finally found him a few minutes later and he fell silent.

Lance found a bench on the left wall and sat on it, rocking back and forth, as he replayed the knifing in his mind. He couldn't erase the image of the man's shocked face as the blade pierced his body. Remembering the blood on his hand, Lance wiped at his pant legs frantically, overtaken by the need to clean himself of the deed.

Cass found him in the darkness. She placed her hands on his shoulders. "You

didn't have a choice. He was going to kill you. I saw it in his eyes."

Lance thought about it for several seconds before responding. "There are so few of us left. We shouldn't be killing each other. It's different with them—the Vladdies—than it is with a man."

"It was him or us. You did the right thing."

He understood what she was saying, but it didn't make him feel much better.

The bench shifted as she sat beside him, unseen in the darkness.

"Care to tell me how we ended up in an armored car?"

As the daywalkers outside began to beat against the reinforced sides of the truck, Lance recounted the exploding office building.

“**Y**ou carried me that far?”

“I have the sore shoulders to prove it.”

To his shock, Cass hugged him. “Thanks. Dumbass.”

He laughed, despite the adrenaline shakes that still consumed his limbs. “I guess this makes us even.”

“So those guys did call in a bomb or an artillery strike?” Cass asked. “That means there’s someone out there still pulling the trigger, right?”

“I suppose. They did say that Heinz Field is hanging in there.”

“Yeah, but I doubt that they have a giant ass howitzer sitting at the fifty yard line.”

“True.”

Cass got up from the bench and moved around in the darkness, swearing as she stubbed her toes and banged her knees.

A dim light blinked on.

Lance turned away from it, letting his eyes adjust. He finally rotated back, looking up at the dome light, wondering how long they could use it before the truck’s battery died.

The temperature in the confined area rose quickly as they waited. Lance could feel himself sweating again, concern over dehydration rearing in his mind.

“Holy shit,” Cass said. She reached into an open bag and pulled out a large stack of cash. “Want to buy an island?”

“It figures.”

“What?”

“It figures that I would find a shitload of abandoned money now. I could have really used that a month ago. Now we might as well use it as toilet paper.”

“Yeah, well, shit happens.” Cass smiled at her pun. She rifled through a few more bags, finding rolls of coins.

Lance thought that ‘shit happens’ could be the new motto for the entire planet. If aliens ever visited the earth in the future, they would look upon the ruined cities and decaying bones of humanity and think, ‘shit happens’.

“How are you feeling, anyway?”

Cass stood, holding a hand to her stomach. “Nauseous and dizzy. Those are the signs of a concussion, right?”

“I have no idea. That was a big piece of building that hit you in the head though.”

“They always talked about post-concussion shit during the NFL games now, so I’m guessing that’s what I’m dealing with.”

Lance grinned at her. “Where have you been all of my life?”

“What? Are you flirting with me?”

His grin widened even more, a combination of actual humor at the expression on her face and a bizarre reaction to knowing that he had just murdered a man. If someone asked him to explain what he felt, Lance didn’t think he could.

“No, I’m not flirting with you. I’m stuck inside an armored truck with cannibals outside trying to beat their way in, and I’m covered in the blood of a man I just stabbed. Getting laid isn’t exactly on my radar right now.”

“Then what the hell are you talking about?”

“Let’s just say that I wish my wife had been a bit more like you.”

“You’re married?” She glanced at his left hand. “Why don’t you wear a ring?”

The truck rocked as something ran into it, the thud vibrating through the floor and into Lance’s feet. He paused before responding, waiting to see if it would happen again.

It didn't. Several dozen hands continued beating against the walls.

"We were at the tail end of a divorce when this happened. It's been over for years though."

"Oh. That sucks." Cass sat on a bench across from him, crossing her legs, but not before Lance got a bit of a show. "She's a big bitch then?"

"If I'd known that all it took to make you be nice to me was saving your life, I'd have pulled the hero shtick a little earlier."

"Shut up, dumbass." She let out a small laugh before pushing the heels of her hands against her temples.

"To answer your question, she's a little bitchy, but I don't blame her for hating me. I'm a colossal fuck up."

"Did she die? When all of this happened?"

"Nah. She and her boyfriend, or whatever the hell they are, took off. They were going to the stadium the last I saw them. That was right when shit went south, so they probably made it."

Cass watched him for a while. "I don't think you're a fuck up. You said something similar at the crack den. You have a shitty life?"

"First world problems, really. I haven't been able to hold a job for years now. Wife resents me. No money. Unable to support us. Depressed." Lance leaned back against the wall, but sat up again when the pummeling of the truck vibrated against his back. "I don't know which came first though—her hating me, or me fucking up. Did I disgust her because I'm a loser, or did I become a loser because I disgusted her?"

They sat without speaking for a period of time that Lance couldn't gauge. No access to the sun made it hard to judge.

"You survived the apocalypse, so far anyway. I'd say that makes you anything but a loser. You saved my ass."

"I'm not sure that hiding in my apartment as people are slaughtered in the streets makes me much more than pond scum."

"Bullshit. Everyone else was too stupid to do that. You carried an unconscious woman to safety. Fuck your ex—she doesn't know what she's missing."

Lance laughed again. Despite the things that had just happened, and still were, he couldn't help himself. Cass' gruff personality and over-the-top way of talking had him grinning like a fool.

"That was half the problem. Too little of the fucking."

"Oh shit. That's the worst. I'm a woman, so I can get laid whenever I want. Dry spells are for idiots."

"Thanks."

"I'm not talking about you, dumbass. Women can get laid whenever they want, so any of them who complain about not getting any are full of shit."

Lance acted as if he was trying to peer up her skirt. "Are you sure there isn't a penis in there somewhere? You talk more like a man than I do."

"It's true," she said, dismissing his comment with a wave of her hand. "How long has it been?"

"What?"

"Since you had sex?"

"Oh. That's a little private. And embarrassing."

"You mentioned it. Besides, who am I going to tell?" She looked around the dimly lit area. "You might have noticed that the world has ended."

Lance stared at the floor. "Six months. Before that, it had probably been a year."

Cass choked. "What? Once in a year and a half? That's crazy! That can't be good for your health."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know before a few days ago that she'd been dating an old friend of mine for the past eighteen months. That kind of explains why she didn't have much interest."

"Are you sure your dick even works anymore?"

That made Lance snort.

"You're a real douche, ya know? Besides, why am I taking such abuse from someone dressed like a reject from the Village People?"

Cass rolled her eyes. "Back to the way I dress again."

"Well, you do look like a fool. A sexy fool, but a fool nonetheless."

"There you go, hitting on me again."

“I’m not, honestly. Just being truthful. You don’t look so bright in that outfit.”

“That really sucks. Here I was, hoping I could finally get that country club membership too.”

Lance’s blood-covered hand felt sticky as the bodily fluid dried. He’d wiped as much of it away as he could, but it still bothered him. Getting up from the bench, he rolled his sore shoulders and turned the dome light on again. He went to the front corner of their metal sarcophagus.

“Seriously though, you said you were artist. Is that getup some kind of statement about freedom of expression?” Lance found a bag that looked different from the others and unzipped it.

Assorted gym gear was inside. Lance’s back was to Cass as he went through the bag, his widening grin hidden from her. He pulled out an apple, two protein bars, three bottles of water, and a small amount of white powder in a baggie—only touching the food with his non-bloody hand. He figured the white stuff to be creatine or a protein powder of some kind.

Saliva pooled under his tongue as he touched the food.

“Fine,” Cass said from behind him. “You told me about your sad sex life, so I might as well tell the truth about my shit as well.”

“Your shit? Did you have to take profanity lessons to learn how to swear so much?”

“Shut up, ya douche. Or don’t you want to hear my stupid story?”

“Sorry. Please go on.” He found an iPod and a sleeveless Pittsburgh Pirates t-shirt in the bag. Smelly sneakers, balled-up socks, a small bottle of hand sanitizer, and two towels filled out the rest of the contents.

“I started dressing like this to fit in with the morons in the art scene at Duquesne. When I dropped out, I kept wearing it because I was too poor for new clothes, and it’s actually really comfortable. And I like it—so shut up. Not everyone has to wear a suit or a dress.”

“I’m not judging,” Lance said.

“Yes, you are.”

Lance opened one of the bottles of water and tilted it over his bloody hand,

pouring just enough to wet the skin. He grabbed the Pirates shirt and used it to wipe everything clean. He repeated the process again, careful of his water usage. The hand sanitizer went on next.

Cass continued, "I was raised in the middle of nowhere, about an hour outside of Erie."

"That's what you said yesterday. I would have thought you were a city girl through and through."

"Nope. My dad raised me. Mom left before I was old enough to even remember what she looked like. I spent a lot of time hunting and fishing with my dad. By the time I was a teenager, I resented the tomboy upbringing."

"So you decided to dress like a fool?"

"I'm going to kick your ass if you say that again. But yes, that was a big part of it. He died during my freshman year of college." She paused, taking a deep breath. "I never got to tell him I was sorry for being such a bitch to him. My mom left him in a tough spot, having to raise a stubborn girl by himself, and he died before I was smart enough to realize it."

Lance turned around. "He knew."

"Did he? I don't know. I was mean to him up until the time I left. Really mean."

"He knew." Lance grabbed the water and food, holding them behind his back. He slid over to Cass, kneeling on the floor in front of her. "I have something that'll cheer you up."

"If you pull your dick out, I'm going to stab you."

"What?" Lance chuckled, shaking his head. "You have problems." He held the items out in front of his chest. "Behold. I bring you food and drink."

"Holy shit." Cass' eyes widened. She licked her lips as she stared at the apple. "Holy. Shit."

"We can each have a protein bar, a bottle of piss-warm water, and split the apple. What do you think?"

"I'm allergic to whey protein. I'll take the apple and you can have the bars."

Lance handed it over along with a water bottle. He went back to the other bench and sat down, tearing one of the wrappers open. The protein bar tasted

like chalk, but at that moment, nothing could have been better. He hadn't eaten since the assholes at the restaurant tied him up.

"I know what you said at the meth lab, but I have a newsflash for you, Cassie—I think we're becoming friends."

"My friends know better than to call me Cassie."

"Oops," Lance said, his tone jovial.

They ate their food and sipped the water, relishing the small moment of pleasure. Cass turned the dome light off to preserve the vehicle's battery.

The thuds against the outside of the truck dwindled over the next hour before stopping altogether.

Lance held his ear to the door.

Nothing.

"Why did they leave?" he asked, more to himself than to Cass.

"Maybe it's getting dark out."

"Do the daywalkers leave the streets when the Vladdies come out?"

"Daywalkers?"

Lance shrugged. "I started thinking of them like that while you were taking an extended nap earlier. Vladdie seems like a better choice for the ones at night."

"That's not a bad name—I like it. And I don't know where they go. The ones that come out at night don't attack them, so I don't know why they would hide. Maybe someone else ran by and the... daywalkers... followed them. Or maybe they just gave up on getting in here. They're going crazy, but some kind of intelligence is still in there for a while—they can talk after all."

Lance listened for a few minutes, hearing the occasional shriek from off in the distance, but not much else. The hardened shell of the truck didn't allow much sound in.

"Let's hope the Vladdies don't find us in here. It'll be loud as hell if *they* bang on the sides."

"I hate not knowing what time it is," Cass said. "Has the sun set yet? We should sleep during the night so we can get out of this tin can in the morning."

"No idea. There's no chance in hell I'm going to open the door and find out either. Not yet, anyway." He wiped away the sheen of sweat on his forehead with

the back of his hand. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep in here—too damn hot.”

“We have a safe place to spend the night and you’re complaining?”

“Hey, I admit it—I’m a huge baby when it comes to sleeping. I’m one of those people that needs the AC jacked up.”

“You better get over that. We aren’t going to feel the joys of air conditioning while we sleep for the rest of our short lives.”

“Cassie, you have a real knack for cheering me up.”

She kicked him in the shin—not terribly hard, but enough to warn him off the name. He yelped and slid his leg away, rubbing the area.

Lance went back to the gym bag and pulled the towels out.

“Damn, what else is in there?” Cass asked. “What’re the odds that we stumbled upon all of that in here?”

“I guess karma can only shit on your life for so long.” Lance pushed two of the moneybags against the wall, clearing the center of the truck’s bed. The towels went on the rubber mat that covered the steel floor. There wasn’t enough space to put them side-by-side, so he layered them on top of each other. “Not exactly the Ritz, but it’ll do. I wouldn’t recommend bumping into me tonight though, unless you want to shower in my sweat. Christ, I’m going to be so dehydrated that I’ll look like a mummy by the time we wake up.”

Cass stood up and looked at her arms. Light reflected off the layer of saltwater covering them. “I’m not exactly a bastion of cleanliness.”

“Bastion? Good word.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Would I mock someone who carries around an axe straight out of DragonLance? No, I was being serious. Good word. Don’t hear that one too often.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

Lance frowned at the awkwardness of their conversation. He looked at the towels on the floor, wondering how their sleeping arrangement would go. The benches were too thin and short for someone to sleep on.

The heat inside would force him to take his clothes off to sleep and he didn’t feel particularly comfortable doing that beside her. He realized how moronic that

was, but it didn't change anything. Most of America's population had died a horrible death and poor Lance York didn't want to take his clothes off in front of a woman.

Is she feeling as uncomfortable about this as I am?

Cass grabbed the bottom edge of her shirt and pulled it over her head, dropping it to the floor.

Lance stared at her black bra, shocked at how nonchalant she was about her near-nudity.

"You're acting like you've never seen a bra before."

"Sorry, I just didn't expect that." He gave his head a little shake and tore his eyes away from the tops of her sweat-covered breasts.

Cass undid her belt, letting it fall onto her shirt.

Lance felt his gaze being pulled back to her like it was caught in a tractor beam. He watched as she slid her skirt down and stepped out of it. She stood before him in a matching set of bra and panties.

"Uhh—"

"Stop staring at me. It's hot as the seventh level of Hell in here." She reached up and turned off the dome light.

"Sorry." Lance heard her lie down on the towels. He slid his shoes off, placing them in the corner by the moneybags. He paused with his hands on his zipper. "Oh, what the hell." He stripped down to his boxer briefs.

"What?" Cass asked from the floor.

"Nothing. Being weird."

He lay down beside her, his heart pumping faster than it should have. He hadn't been in anything resembling this kind of position with a woman other than Liz in a decade and a half. Even though he knew that there was nothing sexual about their situation, he couldn't help but feel odd about it.

His shoulder bumped into her as he rolled onto his left side, putting his back between them. "Sorry."

With his arm trailing along the floor above him, his head placed on it, he wished for a pillow. Why couldn't the world have ended from a zombie apocalypse like all those shitty novels he used to read? Any moron could board

their doors and windows shut and sleep in their own bed.

But no. Reality had to consist of a virus mutating people into raging, steroid monsters. Now he was trying to sleep in an overgrown lunchbox.

At least he had a hot woman beside him.

Sleep hinged onto the edges of his consciousness with surprising quickness.

His muscles relaxed, body finally allowed a moment of rest. He felt himself falling away when something soft and moist brushed his stomach, exploring across his skin just below his belly button.

Lance jerked out of his semi-sleep as Cass' hand plunged inside his boxer briefs. She grabbed him, squeezing firmly.

"What the hell are you doing?" He rolled over, senses tingling, emotions running the gamut from confusion to elation.

"Shut up, dumbass," she said, her voice husky.

"But—"

She gripped him tighter as he grew in her hand. "I said shut up."

"I'm disgusting though! I haven't had a bath in days. I must smell like a gym locker."

"I haven't either." She slid his underwear down to his thighs and straddled him.

His erection didn't share the same protests as his mind. He stood at attention as she worked on him.

They both sighed in ecstasy as she guided him inside her.

Lance lay on the towels, staring at the black that filled the cabin of the armored truck.

They'd both fallen asleep as soon as they'd finished. Cass had barely rolled off him when he slipped away, getting the most restful sleep he could remember having in a long time, heat be damned. Even the occasional shriek or thud against the side of the vehicle couldn't keep him awake for more than a few seconds.

He woke up twenty minutes ago, but hadn't moved yet. The sound of her shallow breaths kept him from getting up. He wanted to let her sleep as long as he could. Having a safe place to spend the night was a commodity they might not have again.

Their activities of a few hours ago still confused him. The last thing he'd expected was her to jump him like that. Even if he wasn't particularly clear on the why of it, he sure as hell enjoyed the act. He hadn't felt this alive in years—decades even.

Lacing his fingers behind his head, he couldn't help but smile.

Odd that it took the collapse of civilization for him to find some form of contentment. Though he'd been alive for the past fifteen years, he hadn't actually lived. He'd been on the run for how many days now? He couldn't remember.

His depression hadn't reared its head since he'd left his apartment. All of his

failures meant nothing now. No one would judge him based on his sparse resume or his off-the-rack suit.

Liz wasn't around to put him down or make him feel worse about himself than he already did. Cheating spouses meant little right now. Corporations, downsizing, and layoffs were a thing of the past.

In the midst of the apocalypse, Lance York was finally discovering himself.

"How fucked up am I?"

"Hmm?" Cass rolled over beside him, her arms brushing against his as she stretched them out. "You say something?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"Maybe you shouldn't talk to yourself when I'm sleeping beside you then."

Lance chuckled in the darkness.

That was the other thing about Cass—her snark made him laugh. He'd never really been around a woman like her before. To say that she was the polar opposite of Liz would be an understatement. Liz's formality and straightforward behavior got on his nerves too often for him to even consider joking around with her.

Cass was different. She stayed on his ass constantly, not letting anything he said slide.

And she completely rocked his world last night.

"So." Lance sat up, feeling around for his clothes.

"What?" He heard her doing the same.

"What exactly was that last night?"

"That was us getting it on."

"No kidding."

She sighed. "Just spit it out, dumbass. What do you really want to ask me?"

His mouth popped open, but no words came out.

What do I want to know, exactly? That question, as simple as it should have been, felt difficult to answer.

"Why?" he blurted. "Why did you do that?"

"You didn't seem to mind last night. After I got you to shut up, anyway."

He found his pants and slid them on. "Hell no, I didn't mind. After six

months, I wouldn't have minded anything."

Her movements stopped. "Are you saying that it wasn't that good?"

So, he thought. *She still has some insecurities behind that tough-chick façade.*

"Are you kidding me? My legs are still shaking, for Christ's sake."

She continued getting dressed. "What then?"

"It was just unexpected, that's all. It was great, but I never would have thought that would happen."

"I couldn't sleep." Cass turned the dome light on. She already had her clothing on and was in the process of looping her belt around her waist.

"That's it? You couldn't sleep?"

She polished off the last of her water, tossing the bottle into the front corner. "I don't know. You're acting like a woman. We're probably going to die soon—why not enjoy ourselves when the opportunity presents itself?"

Lance thought about it for a moment. Why should he worry about the meanings behind her actions? They had sex. Big deal.

"Fair enough," he said.

"We need to find a pharmacy or a Wal-Mart or something." She lifted her axe from the floor and patted the handle.

"Why?"

"Because I don't need to get pregnant right now. Why do you think?"

Lance put his Rambo knife in its sheath. The machete stayed in his hand. When they opened the door, he wanted to be ready for whatever waited outside.

"Oh, yeah. You don't have to worry about that. My boys aren't the best swimmers."

She clopped him on the shoulder. "See? What was a problem in another life is a blessing in this new one. You're no loser. You're a king now." She considered him for a second. "Well, maybe you're more like my jester, but you get the point."

Lance moved to the door, kneeling in front of the handle. "Just because you're a monumental lay, doesn't mean I'm going to take your shit. Ok, it probably does, but still."

Cass chuckled.

The door opened silently.

Lance poked his head through, scanning the small parking lot behind the bank.

Nothing.

The sun hid behind a row of trees, the morning still young. Fresh, cool air washed over him.

“Looks clear,” he said, climbing out.

A wide, red area dried on the concrete. Streaks and bare footprints led away from it, disappearing into a small area of grass beside the bank’s drive through. Lance pushed away the images of the man’s face as he stabbed him.

Cass hopped to the ground behind him. They went around either side of the truck, spotting each other through the windows in the front doors as they inspected the cabin. Nothing appeared smashed or out of place.

Lance spotted a few daywalkers stumbling across a lawn on the other side of the street. Everything else was calm, quiet.

“If we ever had a chance to get to the stadium, this is it.” Lance met Cass at the front of the truck, both of them inspecting the neighborhood.

“How far away are we?” Cass asked.

“I don’t know—a mile or two I would say.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover on foot, considering we’re swarmed by those bastards every time we step outside.”

Lance fished the keys to the armored truck from his pocket. “We could try and drive this beast most of the way.”

“There’s a lot of traffic jams from here to there.”

“If we get caught, we’ll just wait in the cab until things clear out. It’s better than going on foot.”

The inside of the truck reeked of death.

Cass climbed onto the passenger seat, frowning at the red smears on the fabric of the bench seat.

The truck’s engine rolled over, but didn’t start when Lance keyed the ignition. He tried it again, getting the same result.

“Shit, we might have killed the battery by using the light in the back.”

“Give it another shot.” Cass held her axe across her lap, her eyes scanning the street in front of them.

Lance cranked it again, the engine rumbling to life.

The fuel needle indicated half a tank—more than enough to make the trip.

Cass flipped the AC on, giving Lance a toothy grin. “I’m going to enjoy the hell out of this.”

“Let’s see if anyone is still out there.” Lance pushed the radio dial in, powering it on. He rolled through the FM stations, hearing nothing but static.

“Try the AM.”

Lance switched it over and started the process again, going back down the radio band. They hit pay dirt halfway through.

“—beautiful morning, Pittsburgh. The sun is up, the breeze is blowing, and your flesh-eating neighbors are still trying to break in and kill you!”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say this guy isn’t a professional radio jockey.” Cass turned the volume up.

“I guess I should get on with the news, eh? Well, downtown is dead. Literally.” The man spoke with a Pittsburgh drawl, downtown sounding more like dahntahn. “But, *I can see PNC Park and Heinz Field from my super-secret location and there is a helluva lot of military activity down there. So someone is still around, fighting the good fight. Of course, they’re all a part of the NWO and they planted the goddamn Xavier virus in the first place, so take that for what you will.*”

Lance rolled his eyes. “He’s a loon.”

“How many of you are even listening, at this point? Is there anyone out there at all, or are you too busy hiding in the dark, waiting to come out at night and take a bite out of my ass? Who the hell knows? I’m just gonna keep on yappin’. So, I spent the entire night on the horn with a guy out of Ireland. His handle is Connor, but I don’t know if that’s his real name or not. Hell, he could be a part of the cover up, though that wouldn’t make any sense. Everyone’s dead—there’s no point in covering shit up now, right? Boy, I’m sure swearing a lot over the air. It’s a good thing the FCC is gone or they’d fine me to kingdom come.”

“With our luck, he’s going to recite ‘Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television’.” Lance put the truck into gear, shaking his head at the man on the radio.

“George Carlin used to say that—”

“See?” Lance couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the broadcaster.

Cass turned it down a little. “Hopefully he can give us some more information when he’s done saying every swear word he can think of.”

Lance backed the vehicle up, the bumper dislodging from the brick structure that housed the pneumatic tubes. Parts of the construction fell to the ground in broken pieces, brown dust clouding above them.

They eased into the street, maintaining fifteen miles an hour.

Smoke rose into the sky from various parts of the city. The Gulf Tower was consumed in fire, a black pyre of soot ascending into the clouds.

The truck weaved around wrecked cars and fallen telephone poles. They ran over shredded clothes, luggage, and abandoned, blunt weapons.

“I still can’t believe how fast it all fell apart,” Cass said.

Cool air came from the vents. They pointed them at their bodies and faces, enjoying the chilling effect.

A woman, several days into the infection, ran through a row of shrubs lining the sidewalk and charged the truck. She smashed into Lance’s door at full speed, her head bouncing off the reinforced steel. She fell into the street in a jumble of flailing limbs and hair, blood pouring from her nose.

“I love this truck,” Lance said, watching in his side-mirror as the woman got back to her feet and gave chase.

“Sorry about that tangent, folks. I got a little carried away. Anyway... where was I? Oh yeah, Connor from Ireland. They’re just as screwed as we are, unfortunately. The European Union completely collapsed. They barely put up a fight from what Connor says. The Russians and Swedes are having more luck, apparently. Their geographical advantages are helping them survive. I’ll tell you what, when the Russian winter kicks in, these vampire assholes are going to have a tough time. Let’s see you run through six feet of snow, ya bastards.”

Cass smacked Lance’s arm. “Vampires. Told ya.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me know when you see Dracula.”

“Dick.”

“Bitch.”

In his peripheral vision, Lance saw her smile.

He still couldn't believe what was happening to him. Somehow, in the midst of everything, Lance had found a woman to spend what would probably be his final days with. The feeling was odd, foreign.

Yet it was there. He'd known her for a whole two days, yet he already cared for her.

Did she feel the same way? Did it even matter?

Lance didn't know and didn't particularly care.

Though the things Lance had seen and done still haunted him, the weight of it all was lessened, alleviated because he had someone to share the horrors with.

All while he was still legally married, though the idea of contracts and courts meant nothing anymore.

“Is the stadium on this side of the river?” Cass asked. “I've never been there and I'm having trouble remembering exactly where it is.”

“You've never been to Heinz Field?”

“Nah—I don't like football.”

Lance glared at her. “I'm two seconds shy of throwing your ass out of this truck. I bleed black and gold.”

“Maybe we can go to a game together this fall. Oh wait, the entire team is dead. Dumbass.”

“Life without the Steelers. That might be the worst thought I've had since this happened.”

Cass shook her head. “I don't understand men.”

“Good, because we don't understand you either. Besides, earlier you said that the NFL is always talking about concussions. Now you're saying that you don't even like football.”

“The asshole I used to date watched football all the time. He got pissed if I didn't sit beside him for every game.”

“Sounds like a real charmer.”

“–giant mushroom cloud. That’s right, folks. Word is that a nuclear power plant went boom somewhere in the Midwest. I’ve heard Illinois and Kentucky, but people are contradicting each other. So if you see a three-headed vampire out there, go the other way. You don’t need to have your gonads radiated. Hell no.”

They hit a relatively clear stretch of road and Lance accelerated, hitting thirty-five miles per hour. The number of daywalkers increased as they drove.

Lance watched them meander about, talking to themselves or chasing the truck, their minds eroding by the minute.

Two men, their clothes ripped, muscles starting to bulge, veins popping, ran down the road toward the armored vehicle. Lance eased off the gas a bit, but didn’t swerve, knowing that crashing into the median would cause more damage than hitting the two infected.

The truck’s grill smashed into them, sending their bodies toppling to the road. The tires ran over them, causing a small bump in the ride for Lance and Cass. Neither said anything as they drove away from the destroyed, twitching bodies.

An eighteen-wheeler blocked the road ahead, its trailer parked sideways across the lanes. The backend parked on the lawn of a brick home. Lance slowed down, squinting against the glare on the windshield. Cass turned the radio off and leaned forward, pointing through the glass.

“See that?”

“The big rig? Kind of hard to miss.”

“No, dumbass. The guy sitting in the cab, aiming a rifle through the window.”

Lance lowered the visor from the ceiling, giving him better visibility. When they were less than fifty yards from the truck, he spotted the man. He wore a camouflage baseball cap, the rest of his face obscured by the scope of the rifle he looked through.

“I don’t like the look of this.”

Another man stepped out from behind the backend of the trailer, a shotgun resting on his shoulder. He held a hand up for Lance to stop.

“I’m with you—this can’t be good. Keep your window up, no matter what.” Lance stopped the truck, but kept it in gear. “Can this glass stop a rifle round? I know the shotgun can’t pierce it, but that rifle worries me.”

“Don’t know. My subscription to Guns & Ammo ran out last year.”

Lance would have given her a pithy comeback if he wasn’t so focused on the shotgun-toting man approaching his side of the truck.

The man stopped beside the driver’s side door. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans with a tear over the thigh, the white of his pocket showing through the denim. A two-week beard covered his cheeks and chin.

He moved his free hand in a circular motion, wanting Lance to put his window down.

Lance shook his head.

The bearded man scratched his shaggy neck. He held his thumb and index finger an inch apart.

“I think you can crack the window,” Cass said. “Unless Grizzly Adams can curve bullets, we should be safe.”

“Be ready to duck. I’m going to punch the gas if things go south. Get out of the line of fire of that rifle.”

“Just stay cool.”

“Yeah.” Lance found the power window button and depressed it for a split second. The window lowered a fraction of an inch. He gave it one more tap, enough to stick one finger through.

Lance looked down at the man. “What’s going on?”

“Where are you headed?” the man asked.

“The stadium. Trying to get out of the city.”

The rifle cracked ahead, startling Lance. His head jerked around, looking for the point of impact on the truck, seeing none. “You OK, Cass?”

“Fine. What the hell is he shooting at?”

The man by the truck cackled, his laugh high and annoying. “Larry ain’t shootin’ at yinz.” He bobbed his head toward the back of the truck.

Lance looked in his mirror and spotted the body of a daywalker in the street, blood pooling around its ventilated head.

“Larry’s a good shot,” Lance said.

“Damn straight. You’d do best to remember that.”

“Why are you stopping us?” Lance didn’t like sitting in the open like this. They were in an armored truck, but enough of those things would make it difficult for them to get going again if they had to.

“How many you got with you?”

“Just the two of us.”

“Step on out of the truck.”

“Why are you stopping us?” Lance shifted in his seat, anxiety building. What was the play here?

“I said to get out of the truck. The woman too.”

“We aren’t moving unless you tell me what you want.”

The man sighed. “Yo, Larry! Get Ralph up here. Tell him we’ve got a couple of troublemakers up here.”

Lance barely held a gasp at bay.

Cass saw his body go rigid. “What?”

He turned his head toward her an inch and talked out of the side of his mouth. “It might be a coincidence, but one of the men who wanted to kill me in the restaurant was named Ralph. He was the leader of a big militia that ran around killing people when all this started. They wore camo too.”

“Shit.” Cass grabbed her buckled seatbelt and tugged on it, making sure it was secure.

“Sir, we just want to pass. We don’t have a problem with you.” Lance hoped he could talk his way out of this before Ralph arrived. If he was the man Lance thought him to be, the shit would hit the fan as soon as Ralph saw him.

“Won’t be a problem if you get out of the truck.” The man lowered the shotgun from his shoulder, aiming it at the window. “Now get the fuck out. You think you can just drive through our neighborhood and not pay the toll?”

“What’s the toll?” Lance spotted movement in the side mirror and glanced at it, trying not to wince when he saw ten camouflaged men sneaking up on the back of the truck.

They were surrounded by armed assholes.

“Whatever we want it to be. Don’t be stupid now. There’s a whole lot of us and just two of you. Get on out and I promise that you won’t be hurt.”

I guess their whole group wasn’t killed after all. Too bad.

Lance knew from his past experience with these marauders, that getting out of the truck would probably be the signature on their death sentences.

Feet appeared on the other side of the big rig, visible under the trailer, striding up the street in long steps. The person walked toward the back, appearing from behind the rear bumper and doors.

Ralph.

He made it three steps beyond the truck when he spotted Lance through the windshield, his face snarling in anger.

“**H**old on to your ass!” Lance floored the accelerator and jerked the steering wheel to the left.

The bearded man stepped out of the way as the truck hopped the curb. Tires spun on an overgrown lawn, kicking dirt at the men running behind.

Guns exploded all around them.

Bullets ricocheted off the reinforced exterior of the truck, denting the walls and chipping the paint.

Cass ducked behind the dash as the windshield spider webbed in front of her.

Lance lost most of the visibility out of that side of the truck as her window also cracked, but held in place. He ignored everything else around him as he aimed the truck directly at Ralph.

The old man locked his gaze on Lance. He spit a line of tobacco juice on the lawn as he raised his M4, taking aim at the front of the truck.

The windshield cracked in front of Lance from the impact of bullets. Despite his lowered visibility, Lance could still make out the back end of the truck and Ralph’s silhouette.

He pressed the accelerator to the floor and squeezed the steering wheel in a death grip, his hands grinding into the vinyl.

Ralph dove out of the way at the last second, flying by the driver’s side window in a blur. In the mirror, Lance watched the old man roll to a knee and take aim at the back of the truck. More bullets bounced off the steel.

The truck slid in the grass as it went around the tractor-trailer, missing a tree in the yard by inches. Lance spun the wheel and brought them back to the road.

Cass sat up again. "What the hell are these guys doing? They're going to call a shitload of attention to themselves!"

"They're crazy, redneck assholes!"

"No shit!" Cass unbuckled the holster on her hip and pulled the pistol out.

"What are you going to do with that? You're holding a pea shooter compared to the goddamn arsenal they have."

Dozens of cars were parked along the edges of the street behind the eighteen-wheeler. Men sat in lawn chairs around a fire in the yard of another home, weapons resting across their laps. Their heads swiveled around as the armored vehicle flew by, their shouts fading quickly.

More people, mostly men, flooded out of the houses that lined the street. The majority of them held rifles and shotguns and wore flannel or camouflage.

"How many of these crazy bastards are there?" Cass asked.

"Too many."

Three or four tanker trucks were tucked away on the small road behind the houses. They were parked end to end, taking up most of the space beyond the small, fenced-in yards.

Another big rig with a fuel tank on the back, straddled the street ahead, effectively closing off the neighborhood. Two trucks, both jacked up with lift kits, swung through an alley, pulling in behind Lance and Cass.

The window beside Lance cracked at two distinct points and splintered outward.

"We're going to be driving blind soon!"

Lance cut the wheel toward the lawns again, crushing a parked motorcycle with the grill. The trucks followed behind, mere feet away, men hanging out of the passenger windows with pistols in their hands.

Two guards stood by the tanker ahead, popping off shots as fast as they could.

Lance maneuvered around this barricade as he had the first, but he lost control when one of the tires slammed against a missing section of the sidewalk,

jerking the wheel in his hands. The backend swung around, fishtailing through shrubbery separating two plots of land. The rear bumper crashed against a tree, tearing it away, jolting Cass against her seatbelt.

The armored truck ground to a slow crawl in an instant. One of the trucks following them, now visible through the passenger side window, accelerated toward them. Lance hit the gas and swung left.

The pursuing vehicle rammed them by the rear tire, rocking the entire truck. Lance's head bounced off the window beside him, pain blooming behind his eyes.

Cass grabbed the handle on her door, pushing her other hand against the dash to brace herself. "Get us the fuck out of here!"

"Working on it." Lance gritted his teeth. "These psychos are trying to flip us!"

In the mirror, Lance saw the devastated front end of the other truck. Steam rose from its grill. The men inside slumped against their doors, the seatbelts not connected.

Lance got them moving again, steering back to the road. A grinding noise came from behind Cass as they picked up speed again.

"What is that?" Lance asked. His attention was divided between avoiding obstacles in the road and swerving from side to side, trying to keep the other truck from passing them. He didn't dare look anywhere else.

Cass jerked around in her seat, trying to see through her broken window. "I can't tell. Might be something with the tire though!"

"Damn!" Lance moved them to the right side of the road, allowing their pursuers to pull even with them on the other side. "Hang on!"

He swerved as fast as he could, smashing against the lifted truck. The man hanging out of the passenger window, who had been shooting at them with a pistol, was caught between the large vehicles. He screamed as his ribs splintered in his chest, his arm rending at an odd angle.

The truck veered away as the driver shouted at his ruined passenger, not paying attention to what lay ahead.

They crashed into a tree at almost fifty miles an hour. The dying man, his

upper body still hanging from the window, flew from the truck, landing in a driveway thirty feet away. He slid across the asphalt, leaving a gruesome trail in his wake.

Cass unbuckled herself and reached for her door handle.

“What the hell are you doing?” Lance grabbed her forearm, pulling her back.

She tore herself free. “I need to see what that grinding noise is. We can’t afford to stop and check, so I’m going to poke my head out.”

Lance didn’t like that plan. In fact, it felt completely moronic to him. She was right in one way though—they couldn’t stop. More of that maniacal group would be coming.

“Be careful,” he said.

The road opened up a bit, the amount of obstructions lessening. Lance wondered if the men had moved the cars away, giving themselves a faster way to come and go from their quarantined neighborhood. He would have loved to ask them where they hid every night when the Vladdies came out to play.

“Just don’t hit anything.” Cass opened her door, having to lean against it because of the wind rushing past. She stuck her head through the opening.

She pulled herself back inside and slammed the door, buckling herself in again.

“And?” Lance asked.

“The fender is bent into the tire.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, that tire is going to pop. Soon.”

“Damn!”

Daywalkers became more prevalent as they got further away from the militia camp. Most of them stumbled after the truck, crying out as they fell behind. A few moved quickly, their bodies already morphing into the terrors they would soon become.

Lance had to slow down. Obstacles became more prominent after a few hundred yards. The infected managed to keep up as he brought their speed down to just under twenty miles an hour.

A bridge came into view as they approached another bend.

The middle was blown out. Sawhorses blocked the entrance, just like the others they'd encountered.

"Wait a second." Lance moved his head around, trying to find a spot of the windshield he could see through better. "I think that's the West End Bridge."

"So?"

"That means the stadium is close."

"Thank god."

"You can say that again."

"Thank god."

Lance's nerves were too shot to laugh. "Bitch."

"Dumbass."

They reached another clear spot in the road and Lance coaxed the truck's accelerator down, wanting to get some distance from the daywalkers.

The tire popped.

Incredible pressure yanked at the steering wheel, threatening to tear it from Lance's hands again. He squeezed it as hard as he could, fighting to keep the truck on course.

His foot moved to the brake just as the other right tire blew.

The truck swung sideways, flipping onto its side, sliding down the street.

Lance flew into his seatbelt, the strap bruising his skin. Cass shouted something beside him that he couldn't make out. Her blonde hair waved in the air as she clutched at the seat.

The windshield finally broke away, grinding under the truck as it slid on.

Sparks flew into their faces.

Dirt stung their eyes.

The truck collided with a sports car parked in the middle of the street, both doors open. The impact finally brought them to a halt. Lance was suspended in the air by his seatbelt, Cass leaning against her crumpled door.

"Ouch." Blood rushed to Lance's head, pressure building.

Cass pressed the button to her buckle, her hips falling to the door, landing on top of her axe. "Get moving—we've got two armies coming after us."

Lance followed her lead, but grabbed onto the steering wheel as he freed

himself. His legs swung out from under him, hanging beside Cass. He lowered himself to the door, careful not to fall on his injured foot too hard.

Cass ducked and stepped through the opening where the windshield should have been. She reached back through and grabbed her pistol from a pile of glass.

The machete that Lance had sitting beside him on the seat was gone. He searched the small area of the cab, but couldn't find it anywhere.

"Let's go!" Cass stood beside the truck, staring at the oncoming hoard of daywalkers. "Now!"

Lance stumbled from the wreckage, still disoriented from the crash. He pulled the hunting knife from its sheath and stepped beside Cass. His mouth went slack when he saw the riotous mass coming for them from down the street.

They ran, following the road around the bend. The bridge to their right had nothing to offer so they kept going.

Heinz Field came into view as they passed a group of trees, still a half mile away at the least. A helicopter rose into the air from the center of the stadium, banking away and disappearing as it flew east.

Lack of food sapped the endurance from Lance's muscles. His breathing became ragged and shallow.

"I don't think I can make it," he gasped.

Cass didn't slow. "You don't have a choice."

Though she was right, that didn't give Lance any extra energy. His stride became sloppy, knees threatening to give out.

The pops of distant gunfire came from the stadium.

Engines roared behind them.

"Here come the marauders." Lance looked over his shoulder and saw the daywalkers getting closer.

"The what?"

"The militia."

"Geez, I thought that *I* gave a lot of things nicknames," Cass huffed.

Hundreds of the newly infected clogged the street ahead.

Lance and Cass slowed to a stop, bent at the waist, trying to catch their breath.

Barbed wire-covered sawhorses and chain link fences blocked the street, running down to the river. Dozens of daywalkers, maybe hundreds, were caught in the razor wire, their flesh tearing as they tried to press their way through.

“My god.” Cass stared at the mass of death ahead, her head shaking. “This was a bad idea.”

Lance looked at the oncoming group behind them, hearing the engines of chasing vehicles. Time was running out.

A straggler, blue-veined and eyeless, weaved around an abandoned Hyundai Santa Fe heading for Cass. It loosed a glass-shattering shriek as it closed in on her.

Cass planted her heel and spun, the axe swinging in a wide arc.

The daywalker’s head separated from its shoulders as Cass finished the smooth movement. The lopped-off cranium bounced off the street as the body crumpled to its back, limbs twitching.

“You’re such a bad ass with that thing,” Lance said.

“Won’t do us a whole lot of good in about twenty seconds.” She placed the head of the axe on the ground and leaned against the handle, watching the infected close in from behind them.

Lance looked around in desperation, knowing they were knocking on death’s door.

A side street on the left had more of the daywalkers coming down it. Only the river on their right looked safe.

“The river! I hope you can swim.” Lance grabbed Cass’ arm as he ran by her.

“What?”

Lance pointed at the edge of the water. The last of the daywalkers stood a few feet in from the shore, caught in the barbed wire. “None of them are in the water!”

They hopped over a guardrail, landing in the rock-covered shoulder, and ran down the bank.

A foot-pedal boat floated fifty feet beyond the shore, lolling on the current. Lance pointed at it as they ran, a glimmer of hope welling inside. It was just far enough away that he didn’t know if he had the strength to make the swim.

Cass said, "Can you make it that far?"

"Gotta try. Drowning would be better than being eaten alive."

Another of the sick, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, tore himself away from the barbed wire as they approached.

Cass severed his right arm with an overhead swing of her axe. They kept going as he screamed behind them, arcs of sanguine fluid shooting from the exposed socket.

They reached the shore, Lance splashing knee-high into the water.

"Hold on."

He turned around. "What?"

Two trucks and a motorcycle roared down the road, coming in behind the swarm of daywalkers. The marauders had finally caught up.

"Help me get my axe in the holster." Cass grabbed the blade, lifting it over her head and aiming the handle at her back.

"Fuck the axe! They're coming!"

"No! Help me!" She high-stepped into the water beside him, eyes blazing.

Lance wanted to argue with her, but he knew they were out of time. He spun her around by the shoulders and grabbed the bottom of the axe's handle, guiding it into the holster. Cass worked it the rest of the way in, letting Lance secure the flap that held it in place.

He didn't waste any time as he waded further into the Allegheny River. When he was waist high, Lance submerged his chest and shoulders, gasping as the chilly water sucked his breath away.

Ten seconds of freestyle swimming told him that he didn't have the energy to make it to the boat that way. He rolled over and tried the backstroke, letting himself float as best he could.

Cass pulled away with powerful kicks and fluid, graceful movements. Lance marveled at her endurance and athleticism.

He lifted his head, watching the mayhem on land.

The trucks and motorcycle skidded to a stop, tires screeching. Men piled out of the vehicles, weapons raised, bullets flying. They shot at the backs of the daywalkers that chased Lance and Cass, cutting a quarter of them down in an

instant.

One of the men shouted, pointing toward the water. The others swung their guns around and shot at Lance.

“Swim faster!” Lance yelled, unsure if Cass could hear him or not.

Sprouts of water flew into the air in front of Lance as bullets zipped into the river. He urged himself on as cramps racked his back and hips. Agony tore at his muscles as he swam on.

The infected shifted their attention to the men as they stopped to reload. Their unintelligible shouts floated over the water. The militia returned their fire to the infected, spraying them with shotguns and automatic rifles.

Lance’s legs gave out. His head dipped under the surface, water invading his nose and stinging his eyes. Panic gripped him, his muscles quaking as cramps consumed him. He tried to relax, needing to let his body float.

He failed.

His arms splashed feebly as he watched the light reflecting off the surface of the water move further away. The tips of his fingers submerged, his body falling into the depths.

Lungs burned.

Spasms took his body.

Eyelids drooped.

A shadow formed on the surface.

Water rippled as a hand reached in, gripped Lance’s wrist.

He was pulled up as his mind slowed, muscles finally loosening.

His head broke free and he gasped, inhaling air and water. Harsh coughs hurt his chest as he tried to breathe, struggling to clear his lungs. His shirt tightened around his neck, pinching the skin.

“Help me out here.” Cass grunted. “Kick your fucking legs!”

She pulled him against the edge of the pedal boat, guiding his hand to the edge. He held on for dear life, resting his forehead against it as he continued coughing up water.

Lance wanted to thank her, but he couldn’t spare a breath to speak.

Engines fired to life on the shore.

He grabbed the boat with his other hand and turned his head, blinking rapidly to clear his eyes. The men climbed back into their vehicles and turned around, smoke trailing their spinning tires as they sped away. The growing group of daywalkers pursued them.

“Saved by some monsters,” Cass said. “Didn’t see that coming.” She looked down at Lance. “We need to work on your cardio. Didn’t you ever haul your dumb ass to the gym?”

Lance’s mind cleared little by little as he held onto the boat. “Didn’t see the point. Depression is a bitch.”

After another minute of rest, he struggled to pull himself out of the water. Cass leaned against the far side of the pedal boat, displacing their weight. It still dipped precariously close to the tipping point as Lance finally swung a leg over the side and rolled in.

“No more running. Ever.” Lance stared up at the blue sky, taking in big mouthfuls of air. “I think I was wrong—being eaten might have been better.”

“Stop whining. We’re alive.” Cass sat in one of the molded-plastic seats, having to sit on one butt cheek because the axe on her back made her shoulders rotate.

He looked over at her. “You’re sitting like you have a stick up your ass.”

Cass grappled with the axe and holster, managing to pull it free and lay it across the flat surface in front of their seats. “Does that suit your majesty?”

“Almost. I could use a sandwich too. And a beer. Cold beer.”

She socked him in the arm. “Dumbass.”

Lance slid into his seat with more difficulty than he liked. It felt like his body had blown a gasket.

They watched the shore, floating toward the stadium.

Soldiers came into view as their boat moved beside the rows of barbed wire. The men shot at the infected, carefully choosing their shots. Only a few dozen stood behind the fenced-off area, hiding behind sandbags and concrete barriers.

“I hope there are a lot more of them than that,” Cass said.

Lance nodded his agreement. “At least they have the area relatively secure.”

Tents filled the parking lots surrounding the stadium. Civilians walked between them, carrying supplies and bottles of water. Children held their parents’ hands. A handful of soldiers stood guard among them.

The open end of Heinz Field, where the enormous screen was erected, had dozens of military vehicles parked in front of it. A long line of people snaked away from doors under the screen, feeding back through the Hummers and MRAPs. Two tanks were on opposing edges of a vacant lot, their large barrels pointed at the barbed barricades.

The USS Requin, a decommissioned museum ship, sat by its usual dock, stoic against the flow of the river.

A helicopter approached from the East, flying low and fast before descending into the stadium with such speed that Lance wondered how the pilot was able to land it. It took off again ninety seconds later, heading back in the same direction from which it came.

“You think they’re flying people out?” Lance asked. He slumped in the seat,

letting his head rest against the hard plastic.

“That’s my guess. They’re probably bringing supplies in and taking people out. Hopefully.”

“That might be our ticket out of here.”

“Looks like we might be waiting in line for the next decade.”

“I could use the sleep anyway.”

Cass frowned. “I don’t like it.”

“What?”

“Sitting around in a tent, waiting for a helicopter ride out of here, hoping every night that the Vladdies won’t break through.”

Lance didn’t disagree, but he wasn’t sure what other options they had. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Not yet.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Just that I don’t like it. Not sure we can do anything else, but that doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.”

A few of the infected on the other side of the fence spotted Lance and Cass. They ran to the edge of the water and stopped, loosing shrieks and cries. None stepped from the shore.

Lance pointed at them. “They won’t come in the water.”

“Maybe we should just stay on the boat then.”

“If I don’t eat soon, I’m not going to have the strength to hold my head up.” He saw a frown spread across her face. “I’m a pussy, whatever. You can stay out here and float around, but I need food and water.”

“Fine.”

“Christ,” Lance rubbed his temples. “You’re practically a machine. What did you do, run Iron Man marathons?”

“No, but I didn’t sit around on my ass feeling sorry for myself.”

Lance put his feet on the pedals and slowly got his spinning. His legs ached as he angled them toward the shore.

“How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-seven. Why?”

“Just asking. It occurred to me that I didn’t know.”

“What about you, old man? I’ve seen seventy-year-olds in better shape than you.”

“Thirty-six. And kiss my ass.”

They pedaled at an even pace, working their way across the relatively still water. Lance spotted a small fire close to the shore, a pot of something cooking over it. The aroma tied his stomach in knots. He wiped at his chin, wondering if he was drooling on himself.

A soldier hailed them when they were within twenty yards of the shore.

“Stop!”

They ceased pedaling, letting the boat coast.

Two other soldiers ran up, rifles at the ready.

“Have either of you been bit?”

“No! Don’t shoot us!” Lance imagined himself getting this far only to be shot as he reached a safe haven.

“Get one of the docs down here.” The smallest of the soldiers, and the only one not aiming his weapon at them, stepped to the water’s edge. “Come to the shore, but don’t get out. I’ll have you executed if you so much as move.”

Cass stayed quiet during the exchange.

The boat raked against stones as it lodged on the shore. Lance sat up with a groan, but kept his hands visible. Cass continued leaning back, acting unconcerned at the guns pointed in their direction.

A man in a filthy lab coat stalked away from the tents, walking toward the boat.

“Doc Brown!” Lance laughed, pleased at seeing a familiar face. He didn’t know the doctor well, at all really, but his instinct told him he was a good man. He’d been forthcoming with information at the hospital, despite being on a gag order. That’s all Lance needed to form an opinion on the man’s character.

“You know him?” Cass raised an eyebrow at Lance.

“Not really. He was working in the hospital when all of this broke out. He told me a few things he wasn’t supposed to.”

The doctor stopped beside the small group of soldiers, brow furrowed. “Do I

know you?”

“It’s Lance.” His confused expression didn’t change. “Lance York—from the hospital.”

“Oh, yes! My apologies. It’s been a long couple of days.” He looked even more fatigued than he had at the hospital. Dark bags hung under drooping eyes. His coat was so stained that it resembled any color other than white.

“You know these two, Doc?”

“I’ve met the gentleman, yes.”

“Give ‘em a quick scan. We ain’t got all day.”

Doc Brown huffed, but did as he was ordered. He walked down to the boat and offered his hand to Cass, helping her out.

“I’m Doctor Emmett Brown.”

“Cass.” She cocked her head to the side. “Why is your name familiar to me?”

The doctor lifted her arms and inspected them, mumbling incoherently to himself.

Lance held in a chuckle. “It’s from Back to the Future. The white-haired guy who invented the flux capacitor.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“Yes, it does.” Brown inspected her legs and torso before examining her eyes. He turned and gave the soldiers a nod. “She’s clear.”

“I think it’s a great name, Doc.” Lance spread his legs and lifted his arms, letting Brown screen him.

The other two soldiers stared at Cass as she lifted her axe from the boat. Two of them whispered to each other as their eyes ran up and down her body.

Lance felt a pang of protective anger at their ogling. He knew it was stupid, she could take care of herself after all, but he didn’t like the way they looked at her. He also knew that she dressed that way for a reason, and he was fairly certain that it wasn’t to repel men.

“Clear,” Brown said after another minute of looking Lance over.

“Here are the rules, so listen up.” The soldier in charge pointed at the line of people running into the stadium. “We’re airlifting people out of here—that’s the line. You’ll be waiting for days, probably. Get out of line, lose your spot.” He

gestured to the tents. "If you can find an empty tent, it's yours. People are leaving them to get in line. Most are full, but you can probably find one."

"Past the civilian tents are bigger ones with red crosses on the front. You'll find food and maybe some medicine in there if you need it. We're running low on supplies though, so you can each only have one MRE for now. Our last shipment never arrived."

"Why not?" Lance asked, not liking the sound of that.

"The fuck do I know? They're probably all dead." He gave them a nod before heading back to the crowds.

One of the younger soldiers smirked at Cass. "Why are you dressed like a hooker?"

"Because I am a hooker, dipshit."

"Oh really? I haven't been laid in two weeks. How much?"

Lance clenched his fists.

"Unfortunately for you boys, I only sleep with real men. Why don't you run along and find your daddies."

"You better watch your pretty mouth."

"Everyone relax," Doc Brown said. "We have too much to do without this kind of bullshit. I'll take care of these two. Go on, get out of here."

"We'll talk later, sweetheart." The soldiers went back amongst the tents, grumbling to each other, stopping only if they needed to shout at someone.

Lance extended his hand to Brown. "You look like hell, Doc."

"I feel like it too. You aren't looking so good either. When was the last time you ate?"

Cass stood behind him, working her axe into its holster. She managed after a few seconds, but it was definitely easier as a two-man operation.

"I had two protein bars this morning. That's been it for a few days." Lance caught a whiff of eggs and had to fight the urge to run to the tents and steal someone's food. "You bossed those soldiers around pretty well. How are you in charge?"

"When everyone is dead or dying, doctors become commodities I suppose." He shrugged. "Those are just young, scared boys."

“Why haven’t you hightailed it out of here?” They started up the shore, stepping across large rocks and walking on trampled grass.

“I’m needed here. When the camp is empty, or close to it, I’ll leave.” Brown nodded at Cass, who walked in front of them. “Who is she? And why does she dress like that?”

“She’s an artist.”

“Well, I guess that explains the ludicrous style. Where’d you find her?”

“Actually, she saved my ass. Some militant assholes were about to kill me. I escaped, but damn near became a late breakfast for some of the daywalkers. She helped me out.”

“Daywalkers? That’s interesting.”

Lance shrugged. “It fits.”

“Keep her close, Mr. York. Bad things are happening to the women in this camp. It disgusts me to say it. This is a time when everyone should band together. Instead, we’re dealing with rapes and murders on a daily basis.”

“Lance.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Call me Lance. Doc, this place is nirvana compared to what’s happening out there. The world is gone. Just gone. Barbarism is the new norm. Get yourself a gun and watch your ass.”

“I don’t believe in guns, Mr.—” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, Lance. I’ve never used a gun, and I never will.”

“You need to reconsider that. Those things out there don’t give a shit about your political beliefs. Hell, politics are a thing of the past anyway.” Lance pointed at the road beyond the barbed fence. “Half a mile down that road is a whole camp of lunatics. They’ve tried to kill me twice now. They’re taking anything, and anyone, that they want. We’re up shit creek without a paddle, Doc.”

“I can appreciate—”

Cass spun around, hands on her hips. “How do you survive the night? What’s stopping the Vladdies from coming in here and wiping you out? These tents are sitting in the open.”

“The Vladdies?”

“It’s a long story,” Lance said. “She’s talking about the mutated people that come out at night.”

“Oh. Well, the military has a network of large generators setup around the stadium and the grounds. They start them at night and turn all the lights on out here. They’ve also setup some enormous, battery-operated spotlights that they weave around. They attack us every night, but between the bullets and the lights, we’ve held them off.”

A family of four, huddled around a tiny fire, stared at Cass, the mother frowning. The father appeared to be mesmerized by the shortness of Cass’s skirt. That earned him a shot to the ribs from his wife. A little boy, no more than eight, grabbed a book from a pile behind him and tore a few pages free, putting them in the fire.

There goes our literature and history.

“And how long do you think they can keep this up?” Cass asked. “Are there enough bullets and gasoline to do this for a week? A month?”

“I don’t know.” Brown stepped closer to her, lowering his voice. “I’ve heard rumors from a few of the soldiers that they’re running low on everything. A few days ago, we had supplies coming in from three different military bases. We’re down to one now.”

Cass looked at Lance and shook her head. “We should leave.”

“No, you should eat and rest,” Brown said. “Both of you are nearing exhaustion.”

Someone screamed nearby, startling Lance and Brown. Cass continued staring at Lance, hands still attached to her waist.

“I have to see what’s going on,” Doc Brown said. “Please get some sleep. Your bodies can only take so much.”

He took a step in the direction of the scream when Lance caught his upper arm.

“Just one more question. The people that I left the hospital with, what happened to them?”

“Hmm? Oh, the mother with the newborn? She was on the first chopper out

of here.”

“So Ashlee is safe? Do you know where they took her?”

“I believe she is. There are camps set up all over the countryside. She specifically asked to go to one near Greensburg, if I’m recalling correctly.”

Lance let out a sigh. At least she’d gotten away before everything went to shit.

“And my wife and her... boyfriend?” He almost choked on the last word.

Brown shuffled his feet, as if he felt uncomfortable talking about it. “They went with her in the same chopper. They were fine the last time I saw them. Now, I really must be going.”

He disappeared amongst the plethora of tents.

Lance stared off into space, feeling a little better. The three of them had gotten away. No matter what issues he had with Liz, he truly wanted her to escape the city. Perhaps she was already near Philadelphia, in search of her parents. Hopefully, Ashlee was tucked away in her uncle’s cabin, taking care of her little boy.

“Earth to dumbass. Are you there, dumbass?” Cass snapped her fingers by his face.

“Yeah, just giving myself a mental pat on the back.”

“What?”

“I helped three people get the hell out of here just when everything went down. Feels good.”

“Oh. Good for you then. Ignore my snark. Was one of them your wife?”

“And her boyfriend.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“Well, if I’m being honest, her boyfriend beat my ass and they left me on the sidewalk.”

“I really need to teach you how to fight. But first, we need to get out of here. Look around. This place is going to burn. Soon.”

The father of the family sitting by the fire looked up from his book burning.

“Hey lady, do you mind not scaring my kids?”

“They should be scared, and so should you.” Cass stepped directly in front of

Lance. He could feel her breath on his cheek. “I saved your ass again in the river. You owe me. If we get out of here now, I’ll call it even.”

Lance locked his eyes on hers. “OK. We’ll go. But I *have* to get some food and water. Let’s grab two of those MREs and then we’re out of here. Deal?”

“Deal.”

She grinned at him, a small sparkle in her left eye. For a moment, he thought she might kiss him. He could have used that just then.

Instead, Cass stalked off, heading in the direction the soldier said the military tents were. Lance followed, wishing he’d kissed her rather than waiting for her to make the move.

They walked through the maze of tents. Lance was shocked at the squalor people lived in. He expected people to have little, but some of them didn’t even have shirts or shoes. Children played in the dirt, making car engine sounds as they swirled their fingers in circles.

A few women, their eyes blackened and cheeks yellowed, cowered in the corners of tents. Lance gritted his teeth at the sight of them, wishing he could get his hands on the men that assaulted them. What kind of monster would do that at a time like this?

Cass stalked onward as if she didn’t see them, eyes scanning ahead. She ignored catcalls as she moved by a group of men that looked at her like a piece of meat. Lance considered punching the nearest in the face, but he intended on keeping his promise to Cass—they would leave as soon as he got his hands on some food.

Navigating the maze of hovels and people took much longer than Lance liked, daylight burning too quickly.

They broke through the abundance of tents into a short clearing with police tape cutting off certain areas. Larger tents, each the size of a bus, ran in a line along the road leading to the front of the stadium. Soldiers hustled about, carrying supplies or helping the wounded.

A hand-painted sign leaning against the opening of a white tent read ‘FOOD’. Cass ducked under the yellow tape and went straight for it, ignoring the designated routes. She passed through the opening without waiting for Lance

to catch up.

He followed her inside, having to walk around the stakes and ropes that held the structure up.

MREs and bottles of water filled the inside. Boxes and crates stacked atop one another, blocking the view of the back of the tent.

“Running out of supplies my ass,” Lance said.

Cass grunted. “It’s not much when you figure there are at least a thousand people in tents out there.”

“Lance?”

“What?” Lance turned around, looking for the person who said his name.

“Holy shit! You made it!”

Eifort stood behind a folding table covered in stacks of MREs.

“Eifort!” Lance walked over and proffered his hand. “Glad to see you’re still kicking.”

“It took you long enough to get here. I thought you died.”

“Not yet. I’ve had a couple of close calls though. Fortunately, I’ve got my guardian angel with me.” He cocked a thumb over his shoulder at Cass.

Eifort’s eyes widened as she took in Cass. “Where did you find her? She looks, uh, interesting.”

“It was the other way around—I found him.” Cass stepped over to the table. “I’m starting to think that you know entirely too many people in this camp.” She nudged Lance in the ribs.

“Sergeant Eifort helped me—”

“Staff Sergeant, actually.”

“*Staff* Sergeant Eifort helped me get the people away from the hospital.”

Eifort stared at Cass’ butchered hair. “What happened to your head?”

“I’m a blonde, as you can see. I leaned too close to the garbage disposal.” Cass shrugged.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Ignore her—she’s a pain in the ass. So the doc told me that Ashlee got away with her boy. Thanks for helping.”

“I’m still ashamed that I almost didn’t,” Eifort said. “Anyway, you guys look hungry. Want some grub?”

She pulled two MREs off a stack on the table and handed them over. "Sorry I couldn't give you more, but we're on tight rations. We're losing more contact with the outside every day."

"So we hear. That's why we're leaving, actually. Cassie Sassy here doesn't feel safe."

Cass gave him a harder shot in the ribs. The elbow knocked some of the wind out of him, though he tried to play it off as if nothing happened.

Eifort gave them a confused grin. She leaned over the table, whispered, "It isn't safe here. We're running out of everything. We had to stop sending out patrols in the helicopter because our fuel is so low. I expect them to pull us out of here soon."

"See? I was right all along. Dumbass."

"We ran into one of those patrols. A couple of Special Forces guys blowing shit up. Are they here?"

"We lost contact with them." Eifort looked at the table before her. "We're losing people by the hour."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Lance decided to change the subject. "We're going for the mountains outside of Greensburg," Lance said. "Do you know if it's still safe there?"

"That's the only place we still have radio communication with, as far as I know."

Cass jerked her head toward the opening of the tent.

"Ok, Ok. Thanks for the food, Eifort. And for everything else. Keep your head down, you hear? Maybe we'll see you in Greensburg."

Eifort waved as they went back outside, the lowering sun bright against the light colored fabric of the tents.

Cass stopped at the police tape, her head swiveling from side to side.

"What is it?" Lance asked.

"I don't particularly want to go back through there. Seeing all of those people is upsetting me."

Lance understood. Watching the cowering women and starving children saddened him more than he could have expected.

“Let’s go around.” She pointed to the edge of the camping area on their left. The parking lot ended by a small roadway by the side of the stadium. “It might be faster anyway.”

It took a tremendous amount of willpower for Lance to keep himself from tearing open his MRE. Knowing that he had sustenance in his hand made him salivate. Cass kept her head straight, not looking at the mass of people in and around the tents.

A gray trailer on their left had large antennas and an array of satellite dishes atop it. Lance figured it to be the operations center, but he didn’t care enough to investigate it any further.

They approached the edge of the tents when someone shouted from behind them.

“Well, well, well, look who it is. Little miss smart mouth and her pussy boyfriend.”

Cass spun around, hand going to her holstered pistol.

“Don’t even think about it. Toss it.”

Lance sighed and turned around.

Two of the three soldiers they’d encountered on the shore stood behind them, rifles aimed at Lance and Cass once again. The older, wiser, and nicer of the three was nowhere around.

The men before them couldn’t have been more than twenty. Their baby faces betrayed their ages.

“I won’t tell you again, bitch.”

Cass lifted the gun from its holster and dropped it to the ground.

“Guys, let’s be smart about this. We’re leaving—there’s no reason to start any shit with us.” Lance doubted he could reason with these men. Seeing the way they glared at Cass, a combination of lust and hate in their expressions, answered Lance’s question as to who might be harming the women in the camp.

Shouts came from somewhere in the tents. Dozens of people screamed for help. The men ignored the sounds as if they weren’t happening.

Lance let his eyes roam the area around them, trying to see someone who could help. All of the other military members they’d seen were helping the

people here—all of them except these two. He spotted a few service men, but they were too far away. Most ran into the tents, checking on what the shouting was about.

“You think we were just going to let Xena Princess Warrior’s attitude slide? We’re in charge now and we don’t appreciate taking shit from the peons.” The taller and tanner of the two kept his gaze on Cass, though he spoke to Lance.

Lance saw the man’s eye twitch every few seconds. That had happened to Lance a few years ago when he’d been fired from a job and they struggled to make ends meet. His doctor said it was stress and that he needed to take it easy. Clearly, the young soldier wasn’t handling things well.

“Everyone up front! Now!”

Fifty yards behind the soldiers, Major Reynolds burst from the command trailer. He spotted Lance and Cass and his two subordinates with their weapons pointed at them.

“Rodgers! What the hell are you doing?” He strode over to them, a glint of recognition on his face when he got a closer look at Lance. “York, right?”

“Is there anyone here that you don’t know?” Cass asked.

“Sir, these two were trying to... steal from the weapons cache.” Rodgers lowered his gun, saluting the major.

“Doesn’t matter. Get to the North Shore, now! We’ve been breached. If we don’t clear those bastards out, right now, there won’t be anyone left to use the goddamn weapons.”

Rodgers and his partner hesitated, casting glares at Cass again. “But—”

“Now!”

“Sir!” They turned and ran into the tents, disappearing.

Reynolds pointed his finger at Lance. “You and I are going to have a discussion later on. Everywhere I see you, problems follow.” With that, he followed his soldiers into the fray.

Cass picked her gun out of the dirt and stuffed it back in her holster.

“Can we not run into anyone else who doesn’t like you?” she asked.

“Hey, those two nitwits have a problem with you, not me.”

“Looks like they have a problem with a lot of women.”

The shouting in the tents intensified, frightened cries churning to pained.

“Now what?” Lance looked up at the sun, which was closer to the horizon than he would have liked. Where had the day gone?

“I told you—this place isn’t safe. We need to leave, now. I’m not even sure we can make to the shore before dark.”

People streamed from the tent line, dragging their loved ones behind them. Some had blood running from bites and scratches. Soldiers tried to maintain order, direct them toward the stadium, but panic pulled everyone’s strings now.

The fleeing crowd filled the street in front of the stadium, cutting off Cass and Lance’s escape route.

Knowing that Cass was right, they had to leave, Lance stepped in front of her.

He cupped the back of her head in his hand and pulled her face to his. He breathed her in as he kissed her surprised, stiff lips. They loosened after a moment and she kissed him back with vigor.

Lance pulled away after a few seconds, breathing heavily.

“What was that for?” Cass asked.

“Just in case.”

“Don’t say stupid shit like that. Just stay close to me so I can protect your out-of-shape ass.” She reached over her shoulder and pulled her battle-axe free. “Let’s do this.”

Lance took his Rambo knife from its sheath, gripping the handle so hard that veins bulged in his forearm. They tossed their MREs in the dirt, their hunger forgotten.

Together, they plunged into the tents.

The screams grew louder as they moved through the makeshift camping grounds.

They only made it thirty yards in when Lance spotted the first daywalker. A woman, her skin desecrated by cuts and jagged slashes from razor wire, gripped a man's head in her hands and drank from his gouged neck.

Blood poured down the man's back, soaking his shirt and dripping to the ground like a broken faucet. He stopped fighting back after a few seconds, his body going limp in the woman's arms.

Lance stalked forward, ready to plunge his knife into her eye when her temple exploded outward, rigidity overtaking her limbs as she fell sideways.

Eifort came up from the right, an M16 in her hands.

"Thanks," Lance said, barely hearing his own voice over the screams of the wounded.

She gave him a nod and fell in line beside them.

The three advanced slowly as people ran into them, begging for help or trying to take their weapons. Twice, Lance thought he would have to use his knife on someone to keep them from wrestling it away from him.

A massive gunfight ahead, still not visible to them, saturated the air with manmade thunder.

Cass lunged forward, startling Lance, and plunged her axe through the top of a tent. The fabric sliced away, splitting open. A daywalker lay inside, atop a

teenager of no more than thirteen. The axe split the infected's skull, almost cleaving the head in two.

The teen's neck was a mass of seeping gore.

Lance looked away, fighting back the urge to vomit.

"How many of them are there?" Lance asked.

Cass pulled her axe free of the tent, unimaginable bodily fluid dripping from its blade. "A shitload."

"Where did they come from?"

"Shut up and fight, dumbass!"

Three of the daywalkers tore through a tent, a man's screams coming from inside. Eifort took the first with three bullets to the chest. Cass spun around as she had before, and swung the axe with all her might, slicing through the neck of the first. The blade lodged in the temple of the second, shorter infected.

Lance looked back and forth from the smaller knife in his hand to Eifort's rifle and Cass' axe. "I'm feeling a little emasculated right now."

No one laughed as they continued forward, determined.

A soldier rushed past them, clutching at a gaping wound on his upper arm, his face a pale mask of terror.

This place can't come back from this. They'll have to kill too many of their own because of the infection.

They came upon a family of three backing away from two eyeless, vascular creatures. Their bodies were further along than most, the light of day just starting to bother their skin. Eifort couldn't get a clear shot because of the people, so Lance charged forward, throwing his shoulder into the biggest.

He fell forward, tripping over the daywalker's feet. They bounced off the concrete, grappling at each other's arms. It snapped at him, distended canines gleaming in the rays of the setting sun.

Lance slashed with his knife, severing two elongated fingers. *It* wailed and lunged for him, mouth angling for his neck.

With all his might, he jammed the knife upward, catching it under the jaw. The blade plunged in, cutting through flesh and bone before the tip embedded in its brain. Blood gushed from the wound as Lance heaved its thrashing body to

the side and scrambled back to his feet.

He pulled his knife free and spun around, looking for the other creature in time to see Cass lodge her axe in its chest. As the safe zone crumbled around him, Lance couldn't help but marvel at her ferocity.

She never hesitated.

Eifort shouted someone's name and ran ahead. Lance lost sight of her amid the throng of fighting people and monsters.

Something grabbed his shoulder and Lance spun around, knife raised.

Doc Brown stood behind him, face stricken and pale. "It's lost. All of it."

"No shit." Lance turned back, facing the carnage. "Stick with us—we're getting the hell out of here."

"I have to help these people! They deserve everything I have."

"There isn't going to be anyone left to help." Cass pointed at the sun, now inches above the horizon. "The big boys are going to come out to play soon. If we aren't on the water by then, it's game over. We can't fight the Vladdies—no one can."

The doc watched the bloodshed around them, a solitary tear spilling from a welled eye. "Ok."

Lance took the lead, helping those he could and avoiding confrontations he knew he couldn't win.

They got a clear sight of the barbed wire fence when they were halfway through the parking lots. Dozens of the infected climbed through. Without soldiers picking them off as they tried to enter, the daywalkers poured through the defenses.

"Where are the guards?" Lance asked.

"Up there," Cass gestured to the shore with her axe. "I can see the top of a big ass boat. Looks like it might have been carrying the infected."

That didn't seem possible to Lance. How could the daywalkers pilot a boat? They were mindless, mad creatures that were only a day or two away from sulking in the shadow of night. Walking proved difficult for some of them, let alone utilizing a ship.

A gap in the fighting proved Cass correct. Lance caught sight of a large ship,

two stories with a deck and cabin on top, floating off the shore. A long plank ran from the tip, resting on the rocks a few feet from the water's edge.

"Isn't that one of the Gateway Clipper ships?"

"Who gives a shit?" Cass took out the knee of an onrushing daywalker, severing the joint. She swung the axe overhead as it fell to the ground, and sliced through its upper back. "It's our ticket out of here!"

"Can you drive it?" Lance didn't know anything about boats.

"You grab the wheel and steer—how hard can it be?"

Brown knelt beside a woman whose neck was torn away. Her eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, hands grabbing onto his filthy coat. He whispered something into her ear as her movements grew sluggish. He held her, watching her face slacken, her eyes glaze over.

Lance felt sorry for the doctor, for all of them, because they thought this camp would protect them. They pretended that the nightmares outside couldn't get in. What little hope remained in the world was dashed as the final refuge of the city fell.

Grabbing the doc's coat, he lifted him away from the dead woman. "Come on, Emmett. We need to keep moving."

Cass pushed ahead, straying off to the side for a moment as she freed a man from the grasp of two daywalkers. She cut them down with relative ease and moved on as the man ran away without thanking her.

Something whistled by Lance's ear. He flinched away, ducking out of instinct.

Doc Brown grunted and fell to his knees. His coat soaked through by his left shoulder, a crimson stain spreading.

"Doc!" Lance reached for him when he heard something else zip past his head. He dove into the doctor, shoving him to his back.

Lance scanned the area in front them, trying to see if the shooter was aiming for them or if the shots were meant for the infected. He spotted the source a second later—the young soldier.

A sinister grin distorted his baby face.

He's as mad as those with the Xavier virus.

Lance stared into the barrel of the man's rifle as he stepped forward.

"Why?" Lance asked him as he sat up.

Brown clutched at his shoulder, teeth gritted.

"Why not? When the world goes to hell you can do whatever you want."

"Fuck you."

"No, I don't think so. Now, tell me where the bitch is, and I'll make this quick. She and I have a date."

Past the man's legs, Lance spotted Cass swinging at a creature hidden behind a tent. She hadn't noticed yet that Lance and the doc weren't with her.

"Are you deaf?" Lance held a hand to his ear, pressing the lobe forward. "All the other soldiers around here are trying to help. You're only destroying. So go fuck yourself."

"Suit yourself. We'll see if a gut shot loosens your—"

The soldier's chest hitched. The barrel of the rifle wavered before falling by his side. Spittle fell from his lips, hanging from his chin.

He dropped to his knees, his eyebrows arching as he stared at the spreading dark patch in his uniform.

Eifort came up from behind him, rifle trained on his back.

The young man fell face first into the parking lot, his head thudding off the hard surface. He didn't move again.

"I always hated that guy." Eifort held a hand out to Lance, helping him up. "One of those assholes who joins the military so he can kill terrorists, not to keep people safe. He's been flakey ever since we got here."

"Thanks," Lance said. "But he had a flunkey following him around. You see him anywhere?"

"I found his body over there. He was shot in the back." She tapped the dead soldier's boot. "Rodgers probably shot him."

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"Because he could. The man was a psychopath."

Lance looped his arm under Brown's armpit and heaved him to his feet. "You going to make it, Doc?"

"I need to stop the bleeding," he grunted through clenched teeth. "Hurts like

hell.”

“Can you walk? We need to get to the boat.”

“I think so.”

“What about the boat?” Eifort asked.

“We’re using it to get the hell out of here.” Lance helped the doc pull his coat off.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea. That’s how those things got here. It pulled up to the shore, the bridge lowered, and they came pouring out.”

“What other choice do we have? If we can get on board and get it away from the shore, we’ll deal with whatever we find on there.”

“But—”

A bellow, long and high, encompassed the parking lot. It was more animalistic than any of the sounds made by the daywalkers. Goosebumps prickled on Lance’s arms. His fear of the daywalkers paled in comparison to the horror they saw at the church.

They were coming.

Cass ran up from behind Eifort, blood splattered across her heaving chest.

“What the hell are you doing? We need to move!”

“The doc was shot. Damn, you’re bossy.” Lance looked toward the sun, saw it had fallen below the tops of the trees, the sky already darkening. He wondered how much light those things could stand. Would they come out before the day fully gave way to the night?

“We don’t have time for bullshit banter. Let’s go, dumbass!”

“Hey, calling me dumbass is banter! Hypocrite!” Lance turned back to her, but she was already stalking across the parking lot. He found himself blathering as he tried to cope with his mounting fear.

Eifort fell in line behind Cass. Lance gave the doc a slight push, keeping him in front so he could take up the rear.

The other soldiers continued firing in bursts, cutting down the infected by the tents. They made significant progress, dwindling the man-eaters’ numbers as dusk set in. The battle ebbed rapidly once a mere dozen of them remained.

Military personal and civilians with melee weapons closed in on the last of

the daywalkers, killing them off as Cass crossed into the final parking lot. Most of the tents there were shredded and bloody. Bodies littered the pavement, most with neck wounds. The injured, damned by their bites, staggered around, pleading for help.

Those who weren't attacked looked at the bitten and gashed like the walking dead they would soon become. Lance wondered who would be the first to kill one of the wounded. Would it be out of mercy for the infected, or as self-preservation for those who weren't?

Another shriek, alien and violent, shattered the perception that the threat had passed.

Louder and closer.

"Get the spot lights up! Start every generator we've got!" Major Reynolds separated away from a group of soldiers, shouting toward the stadium. "Everyone get to the fence!"

A drainage gate at the right side of the parking lot exploded out of its place. It flipped through the air and clattered on the sidewalk.

A muscled arm came through the opening, followed by the gray, eyeless head of a Vladdie. Its deformed skull and rounded, thick shoulders made it look more like a silverback gorilla than a human. It climbed out of the sewer system and took several steps forward on all fours.

Its back arched as it howled at the sky, long teeth visible in the fading light. More came up behind it, nude and hairless, their bodies grotesquely distorted and powerful.

"My god, they're using the sewers to get around." Lance stared at the creatures piling out of the drainage hole like ants coming from an anthill. "Are they intelligent enough to use a strategy?"

No one answered him.

Thousands of people by the stadium fell silent, watching as modern-day demons climbed out of hell.

Another grate flew up in the middle parking lot. More of them climbed out, inside of the fences.

"Run!" Cass screamed and sprinted for the boat.

Lance shoved the doctor in the back, getting him moving. His hunger and fatigue left his mind as he ran faster than he ever had. The pain in his foot was forgotten.

Eifort angled toward the major, shouting for the officer's attention.

No one could have heard her over the roars and shrieks that exploded from the Vladdies.

Lance grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back to him, screaming in her ear. "This is fucked! Get on the boat with us!"

She cast one last glance at the monstrosities that came for them and nodded.

They weren't the only ones who noticed the hopelessness of the situation. Major Reynolds fled to the stadium, sprinting toward a side door.

Those who stood in line, waiting for a helicopter ride, made a mad dash to gates, shoving against each other as they tried to squeeze into Heinz Field.

The turret on one of the tanks rotated, aiming at the tented parking lots. Fire burst from the barrel as it shot, the body rocking back on its tracks. The ground trembled from the blast.

A mass of the Vladdies exploded as the shell hit the ground at their feet. Limbs somersaulted into the night.

More of them filled the place within seconds. The oncoming hoard streamed from the grates. A side street leading into an alley darkened as a flood of the creatures filled it, marching toward the North Shore.

Half of the soldiers took aim and fired, holding their ground like the warriors they were. The others tried to follow the major, rushing to the stadium. Civilians panicked, running blindly in any direction, trampling each other as they tried to escape their inevitable deaths.

Spotlights flickered on from atop trucks stationed around the perimeter of the safe zone. They angled at the fences, but quickly swiveled around, their beams finding groups of the Vladdies. The muscle-bound horrors leaped out of the light, and charged forward.

The bellows of the mutated fell away, replaced by the pounding of their hands and feet as they stormed across the parking lot.

Lance recognized the sound as the death of Pittsburgh.

The engine of the boat rumbled to life as Cass neared the water.

Printed on the side of the upper deck was the name Duchess in black.

“What the hell?” Lance watched as the boat backed away from the shore. “Better pick up the pace, Doc!”

The upper part of the boat where the tiny cabin sat appeared empty.

Cass reached the water and stepped onto the plank as it pulled away from the rocks. Eifort was on her heels. They moved up the ramp quickly, turning back to face the land.

Brown splashed into the water, his tall frame allowing him to take big strides. He stretched out with his good arm and grabbed hold of the railing, hauling himself from the river. Lance waded waist-high before he reached the retreating platform. He pulled himself belly-first onto the wood as the doc walked up the slight incline.

By the time Lance got to the bow of the ship, Cass had climbed an exterior ladder. Her axe was back in the holster, the blood of daywalkers coursing down its handle.

“What is she doing?” the doc asked. He leaned against the outer wall of the first floor and slid down it, settling in a seated position. His hand pressed against the wound on his shoulder.

Lance watched as Cass started on a second ladder. “She’s probably going to kick the ass of whoever is piloting this ship. I need to go help her. Are you going

to be OK here?”

“I’ll live.”

Eifort stood beside him, watching the slaughter by the stadium. “We’ll be fine.”

“Be careful. We don’t know if more of those fuckers are onboard.” Lance sheathed his knife and started up the ladder. He made it to the roof of the first floor, just reaching for the next ladder when he heard Cass shouting.

“Don’t move!”

Lance hurried up the rungs.

Cass stood at the open door of the cabin, her pistol aimed at a long-haired man wearing a camouflaged jacket. Strands of gray at his temples suggested he was middle-aged.

“Who are you?” Cass stepped inside, putting the barrel within inches of the man’s forehead.

“Nobody.”

Lance stepped onto the upper deck. “Oh god, are you with those crazy militant assholes?” He followed Cass inside and grabbed the lever that he guessed controlled the speed of the boat. He pulled it all the way down, bringing the Duchess to a stop.

“We aren’t crazy.” The man glared at Cass, defiant, jaw set.

Cass’s face, already strained, turned a deep rouge. “Did you bring those things to the shore on purpose?”

Lance almost fell over. It hadn’t occurred to him that the crazy men would have done something like this intentionally. He knew they were nuts, but this went above and beyond. Their insanity knew no bounds.

Bringing a boatload of daywalkers to the camp just as the sunset was a masterstroke of brilliance and madness. These were the kind of men that you didn’t want to cross paths with.

The man shifted a bit, but didn’t respond.

The knife was out of its sheath and in Lance’s hand before he had time to think about it. “Why?”

“A new civilization can’t thrive while the other is still in power.”

“You call that a civilization? Those people were just trying to stay alive! You’ve killed them all!” He stepped forward, murder on his mind.

Cass put a hand on his chest. “Wait.”

“The woman is in charge—how cute.”

Lance took a deep breath.

“What new civilization? The group of men up the road?” Cass held the pistol steady.

“Of course. The Minutemen always lead the revolution.”

“Minutemen?” Lance asked. “You crazy bastards have a name for yourself? You think you’re somehow a part of an American revolution?”

“We *are* the Minutemen. We *are* the revolution. Don’t you see? Those government bureaucrats did this. Now they can claim martial law and control every facet of our lives. We’ve been preparing for this since birth.”

Lance peered through the window at the people in the parking lots. Two of the spotlights pointed directly in the air, no one at the controls. Another fell dark. In the far corner, close to the stadium, a lone light searched the area, catching Vladdies in its path.

Vladdies and the people they were eating alive.

“The government is gone. Everything is gone! You just killed the only people still alive in the city!”

“We’ll build anew.”

“This was a suicide mission for you, wasn’t it?” Cass asked.

“I prepared to die but hoped to live. I can see on your faces that *you* don’t have what it takes to survive in the new world. The meek will fertilize our crops with their rot.”

Cass shot him in the leg.

The boom surprised Lance, pounding his ears in the small space of the cabin.

“You bitch! You shot me!” The man grabbed at his limb, face scrunched in agony.

Lance dropped his knife on the instrument dash and grabbed the man’s shirt, lifting him to a standing position.

“Is Ralph your leader? Older man with a nephew named Mike and a gorilla

that goes by Tony following him around?”

“You’ve met him?”

That was all Lance needed to hear. “Hope you can swim. Good luck when you get to shore. The night isn’t too pleasant anymore.”

He jerked the man around, pointing his back to the door. He shoved him as hard as he could, sending him over the railing. The man toppled backward, falling to the river below. His arm cracked off the side of the ship, rending at the forearm.

Water enveloped him as he thrashed around, struggling to keep his head above the surface.

Cass and Lance watched him from over the railing.

“What’s going on up there?” Eifort stuck her head out from the first floor.

“Throwing out the trash,” Lance said.

The man flopped around, barely staying afloat. He tried to curse at them, but his mouth took in water. His arms slapped at the surface as he swam toward the shore.

They watched him for a few moments, Lance curious to see if he would make it. They would find out whether drowning or being eaten alive was worse.

He hit the shallow slope of the bank and stood out of the water. His knees were still submerged when something exploded from the shore and grabbed him, dragging his flailing body to the rocks.

The screams only lasted a few seconds.

They watched as the last vestiges of Pittsburgh were torn asunder.

The bright lights of the stadium flashed on, temporarily blinding Lance. He squinted, holding a hand up to help with the transition.

Whoops from a helicopter’s rotors came from the stadium. They accelerated, the sound echoing from the empty seats and decks.

Vladdies crawled up the sides of the Steelers’ home field. They moved across the surface with ease, lunging from one handhold to the next. Their strength and speed still amazed and horrified Lance. What place could be safe from them?

They attacked the banks of lights, tearing and smashing at their rear panels.

“Do you see that?” Doc Brown asked from below. “They’re using strategy,

as simple as it might be.”

“I see it.” Lance dreaded what would happen if these things continued to grow more intelligent. Were they regaining old memories, or developing new skills?

The whine of the helicopter’s engine reached a crescendo. It rose from the center of the stadium, already banking east before it cleared the top of the lights.

“I guarantee that’s Reynolds. A helicopter has sat on the field, unused, since we got here,” Eifort said. “They told us it needed repairs, but I always thought he was saving it for this exact situation.”

As the chopper continued to rise, flying over the side of the stadium, a shadow lunged from a bank of lights, clutching at one of the skids.

They were too far away to see the details of what happened next, but the wild way the helicopter gyrated in the air told the story. It fell from the sky in a rapid descent, disappearing behind the far side of the stadium.

The crash boomed over the empty city.

As the final lights of Heinz Field blinked out, they watched as hundreds of the Vladdies swarmed over its surfaces. It resembled a beehive, its inhabitants crawling over the exterior.

Lance and Cass climbed down to the first floor, helping the doc to his feet.

“Sergeant?” Cass stood before Eifort.

“Staff Sergeant.”

“Whatever. There is no way that you guys didn’t know about the infected not being able to go over water, right? They *had* to have figured that out.”

“Of course. Why do you think the fences ran to the edge of the river?”

“I don’t understand why you weren’t evacuating by boats then. Why wait for helicopters to go back and forth?”

“We were. A cargo ship took several hundred people down the river a few days. It was supposed to return yesterday, but it never came back. I know for a fact that Major Reynolds also asked for help from the Navy and the Air Force. But again, we lost contact during the last week or so.”

Cass swore and stood by the railing, staring into the dark water below.

They went inside through a door at the bow. A broad, two-story dining room

occupied the majority of the boat's space. Tables were scattered about, embroidered white clothes on top, chairs surrounding them. The second floor had a wraparound balcony with more tables sitting by the railing.

Doc Brown walked across the dining room and a small dance floor, heading for a bar in the back.

"You alright, Doc?" Lance stayed by the front with Cass. Eifort followed the doctor, her rifle held at the ready.

"I need to clean this wound. I'll probably get drunk too."

Lance didn't like the sullen tone of the man's voice. It sounded hopeless. Complete and utter despair. As understandable as it was, the man had been caring for thousands of people just three hours ago; Lance knew that they didn't have time for defeatist attitudes.

That would get them killed.

"Eifort," he called out. "See if you can find some food. I'm running on fumes here."

She gave a little wave without looking back.

Cass said, "Check the rest of the boat too. Make sure we don't get any surprises."

"Got it."

"Let's see if we can steer this thing down the river a ways." Lance went back to the ladders and climbed to the cabin, Cass in tow.

People cried out from the shore in terror and pain. Their wails moved around, as if they were being dragged across the parking lot.

"Why haven't they killed them yet?" Lance asked.

"Maybe the Vladdies are saving them for later. Why gorge yourself when you can save food for later?"

The thought of people being stored in the sewers to serve as snacks during the day horrified Lance. They'd barely escaped that fate.

He shoved his emotions aside as best he could and inspected the controls of the boat. The engine still ran, so he didn't have to worry about that.

The fuel gauge indicated they had three quarters of a tank.

"I don't know what I'm doing here."

Cass found a switch that raised the platform on the front of the ship. She pointed at the big lever on the dash. "You already used the throttle earlier."

Lance managed to get them in reverse and slowly moved the boat backward, spinning the large wheel to rotate the front end around. After several clumsy seconds of trying to get the boat to stop again, he finally got them going forward.

Heinz Field was a shadow in the dark as they moved by. Lance found a button that turned on the front lights of the boat, allowing him to make sure they weren't going to run aground.

People continued screaming in the night.

"I just want to get down the river a bit so I don't have to hear them," Lance said. "I wish we could do something to help."

"Me too."

The Fort Duquesne Bridge loomed over the river ahead, barely visible from the boat's lights. It remained intact, one of the few bridges the military hadn't destroyed.

The wreckage of the helicopter burned on the other side of Heinz Field. Vladdies surrounded it, standing at the edge of the light.

PNC Park, the home of the Pirates, stood beyond the fire. The moon provided enough light to see its silhouette, but not much more. Had there been people camping around that stadium as well?

As they floated out of earshot of the dead and dying, Lance felt his exhaustion return. His shoulders slumped, arms growing heavy.

Cass leaned into him. "You did well back there. For a dumbass."

Lance threw his arm around her with a concerted effort. It felt good to have someone to go through this with.

They passed under the bridge in silence.

Lance reached for the throttle when something thudded behind them.

"Did we hit something?" Cass went to the door, sticking her head through the opening. She stood there, motionless, for several seconds.

"What is it?" Lance asked. "Should I stop us or not?"

"Keep going," Cass whispered. "Get us away from the bridge."

"Cass? You're kind of freaking me out." He spun the wheel a bit, angling the

front of the boat to the center of the river.

She didn't speak, reaching for her pistol instead.

"Oh shit." Lance pulled his knife free, a movement that was quickly becoming second nature to him.

Cass left the cabin, walking onto the deck behind them. Lance's hands shook as he followed her, trying to control his nerves.

A Vladdie perched on the deck.

Its thick chest rose and fell with forceful breathes.

Drool slide from its canines.

Its forearms flexed as it pressed against the deck, shoulders and neck bulging. The vascularity of its muscles would have made any bodybuilder envious.

Empty orbitals stared at them, its head cocked at a slight angle, one long ear turned forward.

Lance stopped beside Cass, two feet between them. Fear gripped him as he stared at the killing and eating machine. He licked his lips, squeezed the handle of the knife.

Cass slowly raised her arm, taking aim with the pistol.

It exploded forward, moving with a speed and grace that belied its size.

The gun boomed, fire belching from the barrel.

The Vladdie twitched in the air, but kept coming, crashing into Cass' shoulder first, knocking her backward into the wall of the cabin. The pistol fell from her hand, clattering over the side of the ship.

Lance reacted on instinct. He flipped the knife in his hand so the blade jutted from the bottom of his fist.

He leapt at its back, driving the knife into its shoulder.

The beast shrieked, swinging its arm in a wide arc. The blow connected with Lance's stomach, flinging him across the deck.

Pain erupted in his abdomen as he soared across half the span of the boat in the blink of an eye. He landed on the deck with a bone-jarring impact, his teeth clacking together. He slid against a heat pump in back left corner, the metal slamming against his neck.

His diaphragm spasmed, lungs unable to suck in air.

Eyes bulged as he watched the Vladdie turn back to him. Blood coursed down its chest from the stab wound. A bullet hole in its oblique seeped.

Lance spotted his knife several feet away, resting against a white bench. Even if he could breathe, he had no chance of crossing that distance before it was on him.

It slammed its forearms on the deck with a thunderous blow, shaking the Duchess. The wood cracked, splintering around the impact. It reared back on its legs and wailed at the sky.

Lance covered his ears. His eyes watered from the pain in his stomach.

The cry stopped abruptly and it fell back to all fours. Its knuckles punched at the deck as it stalked toward him.

He pushed himself to a seated position, balling his fingers into a tight fist.

Go down swinging.

A thunk came from behind the beast.

It stumbled forward, falling to its knees and elbows, mouth twisting in a screech of agony and fury. Its arm snaked out behind it, throwing a wild swing.

Cass staggered away from the blow, the wind from the near miss tussling her short hair.

The Vladdie weaved around, its grace evaporated. It took clumsy steps on wobbly legs.

Cass' axe, half its blade buried in translucent flesh and taut muscle, stuck from the monster's back. It went for Cass again as she backpedaled away.

Lance scrambled across the deck, grabbing his knife. He fought to his feet, his oxygen-deprived body begging him for a reprieve. Resolve settled in when he saw Cass had nowhere to go. She had seconds to live.

He teetered forward, praying it wouldn't turn around. He didn't have the energy or agility to dodge a blow of any kind.

Aiming for the right side of its lower back, Lance stabbed at its liver. Dark ichor flowed from the puncture as he jerked the knife free and plunged it in again.

He released the knife, leaving it hilt-deep in the Vladdie's back. He gripped

the axe handle and yanked it free as the beast fell forward, landing face first on the deck.

It struggled back to a kneeling position, claws gouging into the wood.

Lance tossed the axe to Cass. She caught it with both hands and swung it over her right shoulder.

It lodged in the thick skull of the pseudo-vampire.

A death spasm twisted its body before it fell still, staining the deck with its blood.

They stared at its cooling carcass for several minutes, looking at what humanity had morphed into.

Lance collapsed to the deck, landing on his tailbone with a painful thud.

“What’s going on up there?” Eifort called from below.

“Getting our asses kicked.” Lance flopped to his back, watching the stars as the boat slowly moved through the water.

Eifort’s head appeared at the top of the ladder. “What do you—” Her head rocked back when she spotted the enormous corpse of the Vladdie. “Holy shit!

She walked across the deck with tentative steps, as if she expected it to come back to life.

Doc Brown followed her, struggling with the ladder because of his wounded shoulder. His face, flushed from the exertion, had beads of sweat covering it by the time he made it to the upper deck. A torn shirt held his shot limb in a makeshift sling, the fabric tied in a knot over his shoulder.

“My god,” he said. “You managed to kill one with a knife and an axe?”

“Barely,” Cass said. “It was a tough bastard.”

“Where did it come from?” Eifort’s head snapped around as she inspected the rest of the area. “Are there anymore? I thought we were safe on the water?”

Lance pointed behind them. “It jumped from the bridge as we passed under it.”

“Oh, great! How are we supposed to use the boat if we can’t go under the bridges? There are a billion of them in this damn city!” Eifort gave the Vladdie a kick.

“Carefully.” Lance stood up, the pain in his abdomen making it difficult.

“We *are* safe here as long as we only go under them during the day. We’ll drop anchor at night and stay put.”

Cass asked, “Did you find any food?”

“Days to weeks’ worth.” Doc Brown gazed ahead. “More than enough to get us out of the city and beyond, depending on how we ration.”

“We made it,” Lance said to Cass. “Told ya. No big deal.”

“No big deal?” She gave him a tired, but genuine smile. “Not too bad for a failed artist and a loser.”

It took three of them, Brown watched because of his injury, to move the beast’s body to the side of the boat and roll it into the water. Lance went into the cabin and turned the engine off. After several minutes, he figured out how to drop the anchor. He left the lights on while they got themselves situated for the night.

They ate small meals from canned goods they found in the galley at the back of the boat. Lance wanted to eat more, but his stomach felt queasy and he didn’t want to risk getting sick.

Cass made a bed for the two of them on the second level of the dining room. She placed seat cushions and tablecloths on a well-worn rug, giving them decent padding to sleep on.

Eifort and the doc made separate beds on the first floor, using the same materials Cass had.

When Lance came back from turning off all the lights and shutting down the generator, he stripped to his underwear in the dark and lay beside Cass. His muscles just started to relax, his mind wandering into a jumble of dream-fogged images, when he heard Eifort call out to them.

“What are we going to do now? Everyone is gone.”

“Get out of the city—see what the country is like.”

“But then what? Are we going to search for more survivors? See if the safe zone in Greensburg is still going?”

“If that’s what you want. Does anyone have any family they need to track down?”

Everyone responded in the negative, even Eifort, which drew surprise from

the rest.

“My parents died last week,” she said, her voice cracking.

Doc Brown let out a long, exhausted sigh. “We have food, fuel, water, and a safe place to sleep. That puts us in about as positive a situation as we could ask for. We’re probably better off than anyone else.”

“We can finally rest,” Lance said. “We’ll figure everything else out later.” He moved against Cass, letting his body relax beside hers. “What do you want to do?”

Cass rolled over and stared into Lance’s eyes. “I want you to let me fall asleep.” She grinned. “Dumbass.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



“JASON BRANT” is an anagram for Bas Trojann, a former Bigfoot hunter who, after being abducted (and subsequently returned) by aliens, decided to hang up his ghillie suit and enter the world of professional arm wrestling. Despite back-to-back first place finishes in the South Dakota World International Championship League, Bas receded from athletics to invent cheese and give Al Gore the initiative to create the internet.

Nearly a decade after writing the bestselling self-help series, *Tomato Soup and Grilled Cheese (Cut into Four Pieces)* for the Soul, Bas has left his life of notoriety and critical acclaim behind him to write existential, erotic poetry.

His wife washes their clothing on his abs.

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