12

New Toys, Old Rules

 We don’t get much sleep that night. Every little noise has us on edge, and the darkness doesn’t help either. I don’t use my flashlight at all for fear of giving away our location inside the chief’s office, hunkered down behind the desk. Ines shifts her weight every so often, and she seems to calm down much more quickly than I do. After the initial conversation after we entered, neither of us have much to say. Rather than make pointless conversation and risk being overheard, we keep our thoughts to ourselves.

 Eventually, as I lay halfway underneath the desk, my hood covering my face, I slowly drift off. My adrenaline has worn off and my body is sore. The last thing I remember from that night is hearing Ines take a nice long drink from her water bottle, guzzling it down like someone who just found an oasis in the desert. Other than that, and the anxiety, everything else from the rest of the evening turns into a blur behind my eyelids.

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 I’m woken up the next morning by the noises my stomach is making. The darkness has become a dim morning brightness creeping into the office beneath the doors. I yawn and stretch, feeling my booted feet bump up against something. I sit up and almost smack my face against the underside of the desk, but my hands reach out and feel it in the way. The space that seemed so snug and inviting last night now feels way too tight for me, but I’m still able to twist my head around to see Ines lying on her side at my feet, facing away from me. Her snoring is just barely audible.

 She doesn’t wake as I wriggle out from under the desk, and I try not to bump her or make too much noise. I stand up and look at the door to the outer area of the police station, and I shiver, remembering the events of the night before in more vivid detail, the howl of the big mutant still ringing in my ears.

 I run a gloved hand through my hair, then notice my backpack sitting in a corner of the room. As I sit down and chug some water from my thermos, I think through a plan for the day. First thing will be to secure the police station and scavenge whatever we can from it. Hopefully, that won’t take more than two and a half hours. I also want to give Ines time to rest from her exhaustion yesterday so that we can cover a lot of ground today. Now that the cannibals are in the area, we can’t afford to be here.

Now that I think about it, the presence of these things so hot on my heels for the past week or so is very strange. I’ve spent several months away from them, with random encounters here and there, but ever since I let that one mutant go in front of the old sporting goods store, I’ve been seeing and hearing them a lot lately. Maybe it was a mistake to let that one get away. Maybe he was a scout and is keeping others on my trail. I should have taken him out when I had the chance, a mistake I don’t intend to repeat.

 The doors (one in front of me and one to my left) are still locked, so I unlock the one through which we entered and carefully open it. I’m grateful that it doesn’t creak, and I push it open completely to see light peeking in from the boarded up windows of the office on the other side. Past the office, I see the lobby, with the heavy metal desk still pushed up against the front doors. My short sword is still strapped to my side, but I turn back and grab my katana, slipping it over my shoulder before venturing out into the lobby. I know I’ve left my gun under the desk, next to Ines, but I’m more comfortable with her having it at the moment, knowing that she can use it if something happens while I’m out and about. I don’t intend to clear the entire station without her, but I do want to make sure that it’s safe to leave the room, and I also want to see what I can see outside.

 The daylight pours through the window we came through to get inside. It strikes me as ridiculous that I left the window open but still insisted on pushing the desk back in front of the door last night. I was just acting on instinct, and the irony is just now occurring to me. I peek around the corner of the window, looking outside. Birds are chirping, and I even see a squirrel burying something in the grass beyond the fence. My tire iron is still wedged in the fence gate, and I see no signs that there are cannibals on the street. Everything is so deceptively peaceful that for a moment I question whether or not I truly did see what I believe I saw yesterday. It’s situations like this that make me glad to have someone else along for the ride now, to confirm or deny things when I’m questioning myself.

 Looking the other direction, into the building from the front of the lobby, I see an open meeting room in the center with a hallway leading toward the back of the building on either side, splitting the path into two possible directions. Both of them look dark.

 I’m about to take a brief walk outside, but I hear a voice call my name from the chief’s office, so I return to find a sleepy-eyed (yet nervous) face peering out at me from behind the desk.

 “We’re good,” I tell her. “How are you feeling?”

 “Better,” she says with a yawn and a stretch. “When do we leave?”

 “Depends,” I say. “How soon are you able to travel?”

 She takes a deep breath through her nose, stretches once more, then stands up straight.

 “Give me a minute and we can go,” she asserts.

 “Well, let’s see if we can find anything good in the station first,” I suggest. “If we can clear this place in an hour, we can go after that. And we need to eat before we go, so let’s make sure we do that.”

 Ines reaches into her bag and pulls out some of the food she has stored in there, settling on her preferred option.

 “This feels like a beef jerky morning,” she says, tossing the large bag of brown strips to me. “We can eat while we *scavenge*. It will save time.”

 “Do it carefully,” I warn her. “Don’t alert anything to the fact that you have food, or it might want some and come after you.”

 “I’ll be fine,” she grins, holding up my gun. “Can I keep this until we leave?”

 I sigh. “Sure.” I’m not thrilled about giving up my best weapon, but she needs it today more than I do, at least until we’re on the road.

 After we make room in our bags, we take the spare things we’re not carrying to search and put them under the chief’s desk, then push the desk up against the far wall. I metaphorically pat myself on the back for hiding them in such a good spot, and then the two of us move out into the lobby, facing back into the station.

 “Do we split up?” Ines asks.

 “No way,” I reply. “Only one flashlight, one gun.”

 I look at her, holding my gun with her other hand on her hip, and I imagine her shooting at a moving target, the noise alerting all mutants in the area to where we are. She needs a quieter weapon. Looking at my backpack to see what all I can give her, I take one of the carabiners from my bag and I clip it to hers, then slide my one-handed survival axe into it.

 “Use that if you can help it,” I tell her. She nods and slips the pistol into one of her back pockets, hidden beneath her thick, plaid shirt, then hefts the axe in both hands.

 “This is good,” she says with a smile. “So we go together?”

 I nod. “You watch our back,” I instruct before turning back to the two paths before us. I let her choose which way she wants to go and she chooses the left hallway.

 The hallway leads straight back, past the meeting room. To the left is a set of swinging double-doors leading to a large cafeteria, and the two of us enter very cautiously. The room looks relatively untouched – tables are lined up in neat rows, and the mobile buffet-style carts are all parked in the far left corner of the room. The chairs are still in their places along each table, and all the surfaces are clean except for an accumulating layer of dust. The floor looks a little grimy, smeared in places with scat from various animal visitors, mostly underneath chairs and tables. All the aisle ways are perfectly clean. There’s a door at the other end of the room with a dark exit sign posted above it – it’s been sealed very effectively with boards and thick screws. The thin, barred windows that used to line the wall have not been boarded up, which makes sense because the bars are fully intact, and the space between them is too thin for anything human-sized to get through. The cannibals must have realized this, because the glass on those windows is tainted and dirty, letting in daylight but otherwise intact. Nothing has tried to enter the station from the outside through this room, which reassures me as we look around.

 We walk the rows, up and down, my light shining in various directions to see what I can see. The place is nearly spotless, as if the police officers sealed off the station, sealed off this room, and then just up and left without a fight. I was expecting another battleground or slaughterhouse – this is just weird.

 “Is this what you would call ‘surreal’?” Ines whispers behind me.

 “Uh-huh…” I mumble. “Very surreal.”

 We finish looking through the rows of tables and chairs and make our way toward the back of the room, where the buffet carts and food storage would be.

 “Start looking through the cabinets,” I tell her, approaching one of the carts. “Use the axe if you have trouble getting inside.”

 “Mmhmm,” comes her oral acknowledge from behind me. A few seconds later, “Hey, Matt?”

 “Yeah?”

 “Where were you?”

 “What? When?”

 “When it all started?”

 I pause, kneeling behind one of the carts.

 “Depends,” I say. “Do you mean when the news first started reporting about the ‘disorder’ or when they all started to swarm across the country?” I use my sword to pry open the cart’s back door. Nothing inside. Not even a power element for the heating trays.

 “That second one,” she says. “The day they started to take over and the military was called out.”

 I remember that day vividly. In spite of the regret and sadness, I can’t help but recall it. I sigh and continue looking through the carts.

 “I was visiting a friend at my old college,” I reply, moving into the next cart. I can hear her going through the back area, prying things open, but as I start to talk, she stops. “We had both just graduated from the University of Dayton a year before. We had been classmates for our teaching program and we’d spent a lot of time studying together, so we were sad to part ways. We both had just recently gotten back in touch a few weeks before – I was working as a substitute teacher in Louisville, Kentucky and she was about to get a full-time teaching job in Virginia. It was an off-day for both of us, so we figured we’d get together back at our old college to catch up and wish each other well for the future.”

 The carts are empty, and I stand up. Ines is standing still in the back area, facing away from me. I can’t tell if she’s listening or looking at something, so I continue while shining my flashlight around the rest of the room to make sure we didn’t miss anything.

 “We were having lunch in the main cafeteria when they came. They blasted through the windows and came from the hallways, so everyone inside was trapped with only one way out. I didn’t see them start eating anyone right away – they just started killing people, breaking arms, legs, and necks. They jumped on top of people and beat on their faces with their fists. Some people fought back…some people just died. It was pretty ugly.”

 Ines continues to stare straight ahead, her eyes gazing at something a thousand miles away, her voice hollow.

 “How did you get out?”

 “We were able to get out of the room, but they chased us all the way to my car. She had pepper spray in her purse and she used it when one of them jumped on her. I had a crowbar in my trunk – not one of those little, baby-man crowbars, but a real one, big, thick, and heavy. I tried to get to her…she was screaming. At first, they were angry screams…she was fighting them off…she was never one to do anything quietly, always with a lot of opinions and shouting at stupid people. It was one of the things we liked about each other, our judgmentalism, the ‘tell-it-to-you-straight’ attitude. Then her screams changed. She was scared, because they were all on her, five or six of them at once. I came at them, but there were too many. I hit some of them in the head, but there were others that came for me.”

I stop, pausing to let the chill roll over me as I remember vividly the sounds and the sights of those moments. They still make me sick to think about them, and once in a long while I have nightmares where I relive it. I swallow and allow the words to flow out of me unconsciously.

“I had to watch them pull her apart, each of them taking pieces of her for themselves. She was dead before I got into the car. I just barely made it out.”

 I look at Ines and she turns to face me. I watch for her reaction, and she looks like I feel: cold and full of regret. She probably went through something similar. I’m sure anyone left today did.

 “So…that’s where I was…was that what you wanted to know?”

 Ines is quiet and doesn’t meet my eyes. She looks at her feet, which shuffle.

 “Yes…” she says at first. “…but also…not really…”

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 The rest of the police station doesn’t take very long to search. The majority of the doors are unlocked, although the whole place is just as eerily clean and tidy as the cafeteria. But then, we come upon a thick metal door. It’s locked, sealed into the wall firmly. I peer through the tiny slot with my flashlight up against the side of my face, and I see a few boxes inside a dark, narrow room. The sign beside the door is faded, but the wording is readable: ‘Munitions’.

 “Oh, hot dang!” I gasp.

 “What is it?”

 “There might be weapons in there! And I see boxes…we gotta get in there.”

 Ines examines the door and the wall around it. “I don’t see any way inside.”

 “Then I guess we’ll have to make one ourselves,” I decide aloud. I motion for her to hand me the survival axe, which she does before taking a step back. I take a few swings at the aging plastic and wood wall around the door. The material is tough, but not invincible. With a few swings, I’m able to make a large hole in the wall.

 “That’s quite loud,” Ines comments, looking around. I hand her back the axe and draw the Bowie knife from my belt, using it to slice into the wall some more and also to pry some of it away from the door. I can see the multi-tiered locks pinning the door inside the wall, so I know that all I have to do is break away enough of the wall and it will pull free.

 “See anything?” she asks, glancing over my shoulder. I continue to pry and pull with my hands and my knife.

 “No…not yet…you?”

 “No, I don’t think anything is inside with us,” Ines replies, peering around the corner carefully.

 I’m making some real progress, but I can feel myself starting to sweat and tire. This better be worth all the noise and effort I’m making.

 Just then, I hear a welcome ‘snap’, and the door comes loose with a shower of plastic and wood splinters.

 “Nice…” I tell myself.

 We both stand back and aim into the room, Ines with the pistol, me with the flashlight and sword. Nothing moves, except a few particles of dust rising in the air. The musty old smell wafts past us and around us, and I can see clearly that there aren’t any windows.

 The long, narrow room is more like a big hallway with shelves lining the walls. The shelves are filled with boxes, most of them torn open and left in their places. I pick through each box and don’t find very much except for some more batteries for my flashlight, but halfway down is a large workbench, and that’s where we hit the jackpot.

 “I knew it!” I exclaim. Ines is beside me the next instant.

 “Ohhhhhhhh…” is all she can express.

 We’ve hit the motherlode: there are several bullet-proof vests lying here, along with boxes of .22 and 9mm ammunition. Ines immediately pushes past me and lays claim to the collapsible baton and the Taser (the latter looks so much like a gun that she doesn’t realize it at first).

 “How far does this go?” she asks.

 “Most of them have a fifteen-foot range,” I tell her. “It’s one shot, but once you use that shot, you can use it as a stun gun.”

 Ines examines it, turning it end-over-end, looking at the switch for the different pulse durations. When she sees the built-in LED flashlight, she nearly squeals with delight.

 “Finally!” she exclaims.

 I smile, holding up a second flashlight along with several battery packages. “Then I guess you won’t be needing these.”

 She snatches them out of my hands, and I’m happy to let her. She sticks all her new toys into her bag, and I start consciously looking around for a utility belt that would better suit her. I feel her tap my arm, and turn to see her holding my gun out to me by the barrel.

 “Here. You can have this back.”

 I shake my head. “You keep it. That Taser only fires a single shot, and it’s non-lethal.”

 She looks disappointed. “Yeah…I know…”

 I don’t understand her reaction. “What?”

 “It’s…” she lowers the gun, letting it hang at her side as she looks at the floor.

 “It’s what?” I don’t want to press too hard, but she’s really bothered by something, and I want to get whatever it is out of the way so that we can move on and get out of here. She takes a short breath and looks up at me, right into my eyes.

 “I want to ask you something…”

 *“Oh, geez…”* First of all, when someone (particularly someone of the opposite gender) starts the conversation with that sentence, it’s a bad sign. Second, her tone makes me uneasy. *“If she’s going to ask about my history with women, I swear to God…”*

 “Go ahead,” I say, turning and going through the other things on the bench. She hesitates, which makes it even worse, but then she finally speaks up, saying something that sounds like it’s been on her mind for a while.

 “Do you think that those…things…the mutants, or whatever you call them…do you know how they get that way?”

 *“Thank God…nothing to do with relationships at all…”*

 “No, not really,” I reply. “Some kind of ‘condition’, is all I heard.”

 “So you’ve never seen anyone turn into one?”

 “Nope.”

 “Then how do we know they came from people?”

 I never considered that before. It’s a good question, but I can’t help but think that it’s pretty obvious.

 “Well, just look at ‘em,” I say. “I mean, where else could they have come from? The news was covering it from the beginning, when the first one of them came up, and all the officials and scientists and doctors said it was some sort of condition that caused people to turn into mindless cannibals. Some of 'em said it was something called 'Wendigo Psychosis' or some nutty crap like that, and others said that it was something viral. They all were tossed into quarantine together, from what I heard, and they started forming their own society and communicating and stuff.”

 On the bench, I find a few more things. I find a set of radios, two pairs of handcuffs, and a set of keys with a tag on them labeled ‘Evidence Rm’. I shine my flashlight down the end of the hallway and see another door, just like the one I broke through to get into here. I make my way toward it, kicking cardboard boxes out of the way, and Ines follows me, her issue still not resolved.

 “But…past all that…they’re…” She trails off.

 “They’re what?” I ask, trying to fit various keys into the door lock.

 “They’re still…”

 “They’re still human? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

 Ines sighs. I stop and turn, seeing her look at me pleadingly.

 “Are you asking me for my opinion, or are you telling me what you believe?” I ask.

 Ines rubs her arms. “I want to believe it. I think there’s something human still left in them.”

 “You can’t be serious…”

 “But think about it, Matt!” she cries, her accent especially pronounced as she becomes more animated. “They communicate to each other, they organize themselves, some of them wear clothes, they build things – I’ve seen them make houses and buildings out of straw and mud and sticks! They’re primitive, but I think they’re still people.”

 “People who *eat other people*!” I say loudly. “And I’ve seen them even eat each other! They roar like monsters and they jump and climb and do things that real human beings don’t do! They’re superhuman in body and sub-human in their minds.”

 “But what if someone finds a cure for them?” Ines begs. I shake my head and turn back to the keys and the lock.

 “Who’s going to find it? You’re the first living person I’ve seen since they took over.”

 “But I was with a group of people who survived for a few months, and you found me, so that proves that other people are out there. You really don’t think that there are people left in the world who are trying to fix this?”

 The lock turns. I found the right key. I look back at Ines before I open the door to see her face. She really means what she’s saying.

 “No, I don’t,” I say. “I think there are a few small groups out there trying to survive, but I don’t think there’s a big group of scientists in a lab working on an antidote. Even if someone is looking for one, those mutants will never go back to being the same.”

 Ines opens her mouth to speak, but the squeaking of the opening door stops her from saying anything right away. I shine my flashlight around and see an evidence room full of boxes, bags, and other miscellaneous things. We both walk in together, looking around, the subject of our conversation still hanging in the air. I’m hoping she won’t try to bring it up again, but my hopes are in vain.

 “So then…if someone finds a cure and turns them back into normal humans…how will you feel about having killed some of them?”

 I spy my prize: a 9 mil pistol. I snatch it from the shelf and use my pocket knife to cut the plastic bands. I check the slide and open it to make sure it isn’t loaded, then I discover another empty magazine lying right next to that spot on the shelf. Ines shines her light on me, watching me examine the gun with a grim expression.

 “You plan on using that?” she asks.

 “If I have to,” I inform her with a serious tone.

 “Even if they’re really people?”

 I stop and turn to face her straight-on. “Ines, have you ever met one of these things up close? Have you ever fought one of them with your bare hands?”

 She shakes her head. “I’ve seen other people fight them, though, from a distance.”

 “Then you ought to know the answer,” I insist, walking back out of the evidence room. I make my way back over to the bench and start loading the 9mm bullets into the magazines, putting the rest of the ammo (about fifty rounds) into my backpack and fitting the loaded gun into my pocket where the .22 was before.

 “If those cannibals weren’t cannibals at all, and they weren’t mutants, I wouldn’t be doing anything different,” I say to her. “They attack me, and I defend myself. I’m not out there hunting them, and I’m not torturing them, I’m just trying to stay alive. And now I’m trying to help *both* of us stay alive. I don’t care if it’s a mutant, or a human, or an alien from Mars, or any crazy combination of any of those – if someone or something comes after me or comes after you, I’m going to fight, and I’m going to fight to win. If you can’t handle that, you can feel free to leave the guns and knives with me, take your bag and your Taser, and find someone else to help keep you safe and bring you back from the brink of death, but don’t expect me to apologize for valuing your life or mine over the lives of monsters who are trying to eat us and take over the world.”

 There’s a long pause, and for a moment, I realize how harshly I just spoke. I was always one to speak my mind, but it seems my time surviving alone in a post-apocalyptic world has removed any filter I had before. I realize I need to be careful now that I have a basic human relationship to care about, but I also feel that it doesn’t make my experiences any less valid. She doesn’t understand. I don’t know precisely what she’s been through before we met, but I do know that she hasn’t been fighting for breath like I have. She’s the one who gave up, and I’m the one who saved her. She wouldn’t be here without me, so how dare she question the things I’ve done and am willing to do for both our sakes?

 She comes back into the munitions room with two smoke bombs that she sticks into her bag. I don’t have to hear her talk to know that she’s mad – she’s brusque and silent, and won’t look at me at all. I expect her to take her pistol and slap it down on the bench next to me, but she doesn’t, which surprises me. She follows her flashlight to the door and looks out into the more moderately lit portion of the station. Even as angry at me as she is, I can see that she’s deep in thought. I realize that I just told her that she should leave if she disagreed with me, but the thought of her walking out just now make my heart skip a beat. I give a brief thought to apologizing to her, but with what I just said and her current emotional state, I doubt it will do any good.

 My eye catches a dark shape beneath the bench, and I find a box filled with straps, belts, holsters, and the like. Perfect. I pull the box out and start to look through it, but Ines speaks up as I’m kneeling on the floor.

 “I’m hungry,” she informs me dispassionately. “I’m going to start a fire in the cafeteria and eat some meat.”

 I pause. I don’t like the idea of cooking food in this area, and I wanted to leave as soon as we were done searching. But I doubt arguing with her any further today (or at all this week) will be beneficial. Plus, it’s not as if she asked – rather, she simply told me she was going to do it, almost as if she’s challenging me to see if I’ll try to contradict her.

 “Fine,” I reply, holding the box. “I’ll be there in just a sec.”