

Jessica and Roger both picked up on the somber atmosphere as George and I returned. The older man was silent as he stashed a small bag in the back of the cart before climbing into the golf cart, leaving Jessica, Roger, and me on the bikes. We left without much discussion, George and golf cart following behind us.

We crossed the town outskirts with relative ease, with only Roger having any issues. He was clearly not as in shape as Jessica and hadn't been blessed with a total workup like I had. Still, we only stopped twice, both at the top of some of the larger hills around the town's outskirts. Considering this was the second trip of the day with the young man, we weren't surprised by the need to stop. At the top of the first hill, we paused, letting Roger catch up and recover. Nothing of note happened as we waited, starting back up when Roger was ready.

It wasn't until we stopped for a second time, when Roger climbed off his bike, stepping a few feet away to sit on a car bumper, that our luck turned south.

Roger was breathing a bit heavily, but nothing too concerning. He had assured us it was less of a cardio problem and more of a strength issue, which really didn't matter, but he felt it was important. While he recovered, I grabbed my water bottle from under my bike. I had just popped the nozzle when George called out.

"We got company," He said clearly, his voice calm.

I spun to look, dragging myself off of my bike and following where he was looking, spotting the three feline monsters he had noticed. They were slowly stalking out from behind a house, hackles raised as they walked around us. Their eyes gleamed as they stared us down.

"More from the right," Jessica said, prompting me to turn.

Sure enough, four more of the felines were prowling around. With a sinking feeling, I continued to scan around, cursing under my breath when I spotted a third group of three coming up after us up the road.

"From behind, too," I said. "Everyone get together and get out your guns. We are going loud."

Roger was the furthest away and scrambled from his spot, joining us as we huddled up. The clearly scared teenager ran past his bike, where his new rifle, one of the AR-15s we found in the bunker, was leaning against the cart. He turned around to grab it, but I reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him closer.

"Too late, get out your pistol," I said as Jessica and George reached us, the horned feline monsters circling closer and closer. "Get ready..."

The large, monstrous cats seemed happy to circle around us, clearly looking for an opening. Roger, who was nearly shaking like a leaf, was getting the most attention as he struggled to hold his pistol steady. Meanwhile, Jessica's shotgun, my own pistol, and George's rifle were steady and ready.

"Now!"

My shout was nearly cut off by Jessica and George nearly instantly opening fire. The bark of George's rifle and the punt of Jessica's shotgun was nearly deafening as I aimed and opened fire myself. I managed to put three rounds into the nearest feline, which surprisingly dropped immediately, its body tensing up and quivering as I hit something vital. The other two felines that I had been focusing on immediately charged, one leaping up onto the hood of a car, jumping off to clear a considerable amount of distance, while the third jukeed and ran around another vehicle, almost as if it knew it needed to take cover.

The jumping feline made a beeline for Roger, trying to pick off the weakest link. Roger yelped and fired his pistol, spots of dirt kicking up on either side of the charging monstrous animal. I jabbed out with my fingers and launched a spike of electricity at the feline, the flash of energy hitting its shoulder blade. The damage was enough to leave a large burned spot, but the big deal was how the big cat locked up, its momentum carrying it forward, skidding and rolling across the asphalt. It recovered quickly from the fall, scrambling to its feet despite the leg I had hit obviously not working very well, but by then, it was too late. With its charge stopped Roger had enough time to release a long breath and fire again. He still missed twice, but managed to score three hits that caused the feline to sag to the ground.

Meanwhile, the last feline of the trio came out from behind the car, charging directly for me. Despite its impressive speed, the distance between us was plenty wide enough for me to line up my sights, dropping the monster with a pair of shots.

With my targets cleared, I turned to see if Jessica or George needed any help. George was turning just as I was, his four targets dead and bleeding, but Jessica didn't need either of our help. One of Jessica's targets was dead further back, almost exactly where it was when I called the attack, its head completely gone. The other two were only a few feet closer, their legs tangled in bramble, bleeding from dozens of cuts in their legs and splatterings of buckshot along their torso and head.

Roger sagged as silence returned to the road, but I kept him from moving. He tensed back up, and together we spent nearly a minute waiting for another ambush before finally letting our guard down. I gave Jessica a look, who nodded and kept her weapon ready, scanning the area constantly.

"Okay, everyone okay?" I asked, getting a shaky nod from Roger and a confident one from George.

"I... Sorry," Roger said, carefully putting his pistol back in his holster. "I... I was useless."

"It's fine, Roger. Not everyone can handle fighting," I assured him. "This is on me as well. I shouldn't have pushed you to come out."

"No, no... I should have put my foot down," he responded, his hands on his knees as he started to come down from his adrenaline rush. "You asked, and I said yes, you didn't force me. But... I think Barry was right. I'm gonna try and focus on something else."

"That's up to you, Roger," I said as I patted his back. "Let's just focus on making it home. Then we can sit down and talk about it."

For a moment, I was worried that he would fold, but slowly he stood back up, letting out another long breath, seeming to rally. He looked at me and nodded before making his way to his bike. Satisfied that he would at least make it home, I turned to see George dragging one of the monster cats onto the passenger seat of the golf cart, having already put one on the trailer.

"Can it carry the extra weight?" I asked as I helped him get the second feline secure.

"I think so. Worst comes to worst, I can just push this one out," He explained. "Think you could carry one draped over your cart?"

"... yeah, probably."

Together, we lifted a third cat over my cart, shaking it a bit to make sure it was securely on there. When we were done, we climbed back onto our respective vehicles and pulled away from the rest site turned battleground.

It was only a short trip back to the bastion, where Roger and George, with Alissa and the kid's help, started to ferry things inside. Meanwhile, Jessica and I cleaned our kills, or rather, Jessica cleaned the kills while I helped and learned so that I could do it in the future.

"My dad used to have one of those long, waist-high freezers, stuffed with all sorts of game meat," She explained as we used one of the empty carts to haul large felines to the edge of the bastion perimeter so that we could dump the offal away from us. "He would make tons of jerky and smoked meats, too."

"Think you could do something like that?" I asked as she strung up one of the smaller creatures on the side of a telephone. "With the bastion making supplies last longer, that kind of simple preservation should last a long time."

"Uhh... yeah, I can do that. I'll need to get some supplies first," She said. "Honestly, I bet there are a few places we could find smokers around the town. Maybe the hardware store... If not, I can set something simple up."

She focused for a moment on preparing to clean the first, starting by slicing its throat to let all of its blood drain. When it was done she turned back to me.

"So... should we bother with the hide?"

"...No, there's no point. We have no reason to start making our own clothes, not yet at least, and seeing as we could punch through the hide easily with our spears, it won't be worth anything for armor."

She nodded, and after a few minutes of waiting for it to drain, she got to work while I watched studiously. She pulled off the hide first, striping it off quickly, getting it out of the way before she sliced its stomach, letting the offal and innards fall into a short trash barrel we had snagged from beside a house.

When the kill was clean, she roughly chopped it up into smaller chunks, keeping anything useful and not really bothering to get it perfect, just going after the large cuts. I carried the parts back to the cart while she got to work on the next one. When the third kill was cleaned and butchered, I dragged the barrel of guts away from the border of the bastion. Once I was far enough away to where I hoped the smell wouldn't bother us, and any attention it got wouldn't sniff out our home, I dumped it and walked back, leaving the barrel behind.

When we got back, we brought the meat inside and rinsed it off. Half of it went into the freezer, while the other half was dumped into two larg bowls with some basic seasoning to marinate. It took up most of the freezer and fridge, but we had plans to head out the next day to get our hands on a smoker or dehydrator. If we couldn't find either, Jessica would attempt to make a crude homemade smoker.

By the time we were done with the meat, the sun was beginning to set, and everyone was getting tired. We had done a lot in the first two-thirds of the day, so I didn't feel guilty about spending the last third unwinding. I did eventually find Roger, who had been quiet since our little skirmish on the way home, and understandably so. He was leaning against the parapet that surrounded the bastion center when I found him, looking out over the bastion clearing. We chatted for a while, and he eventually expressed interest in working on our spears. He wanted to try working with the dragon's teeth, making them into spears or other weapons.

"I know my way around most power tools, and it won't be the first thing I've ever made," He assured me.

"Alright, that's fine with me Roger," I said with a nod. "I want you to put together a basic outline of how you would build it first. The teeth are a finite resource for now, so we can't just hack them apart on a whim."

"Yeah, sure, I can do that," He agreed, clearly already starting to plan in his mind. "They would need to be mostly metal, like your current spears... I'll put some thought into it and get back to you soon..."

He walked away, already wrapped up in his thoughts, heading inside as he mumbled to himself. I chuckled as he left, shaking my head as I headed back inside after him. I looked around the first floor of the bastion living space. Alissa was making us dinner, using some of the freshly hunted meat to make quesadillas of all things. It was a bizarre feeling, fighting against the apocalypse while also having what was essentially a taco night.

While she cooked, George was starting to put the radio system that Abe had in storage at the bunker back together. It was made up of several different pieces, including a handheld microphone and a set of speakers. George was already sort of familiar with the system, having spent a few days trying to reach anyone nearby while he and Jason were stuck in the bunker.

It was interesting to see the machine light up and activate with the power cords hanging from the back. Once it was working, George moved it to a small table with wheels, pushing it all to the side of the room to keep the tables clear.

We enjoyed a nice dinner, celebrating our success so far. It might have been a bit early to celebrate anything, but between the supplies we had uncovered and the problems we had worked through, it felt like we were doing good. Barry and Amelia even made an appearance, the former draped in an extra blanket, but enjoying the horned feline meat tacos. Unfortunately, Amelia was barely up to eating some fortified stock. Still, it was good to see them both smiling, even if they both looked tired and sick.

The next morning, Alissa tried her healing spell on Barry in an attempt to clear up the effects of being during a jump. Unfortunately, it did nothing, and Sally explained that as far as she understood, Barry was actually perfectly healthy. It was just his mind and soul that needed to recover from such a realistic death.

After the experiment, Jessica, George, and I made a trip out of the bastion. Jessica needed some chemicals if she was going to attempt to tan the dragon hide, and we also wanted a smoker and dehydrator. Roger also wanted a few things from the hardware store to put together his first prototype. The design he described to me for the dragon tooth spear seemed good enough as far as I could see, though it would only work for some of the larger teeth.

We managed to find two really nice-looking countertop dehydrators in an appliance shop not far from the bastion, as well as everything Roger asked for and a bit more from a hardware store. Unfortunately, we could not find a smoker or the stuff Jessica needed to take the dragon hide.

In the end, we decided to cut our losses at around three in the afternoon. Once back at the bastion, I helped Jessica get started on making feline jerky. We set up the dehydrators in the

supply room, on top of the other, and quickly fed it a bunch of now marinated feline monster meat.

When everything was running, I ended up heading up to the kitchen area. We had a bunch of new weapons, and we hadn't really cleaned or maintained them since we had pulled them from the safe. George, who was sitting at the radio, nodded in approval when he realized what I was doing. He spent a minute setting the radio to scan before sitting down to help me.

We had only gotten through four of the eight Glocks we now had when the radio switched to a channel that crackled with activity.

"- listening, please respond. This is Charles McConnel, Fire Chief of the Danten Fire Department," The voice coming through the radio said. "We have ten survivors and three firemen here. We have hunkered down, but we are now surrounded by giant monsters. We have attempted to fight them... but we have failed. If there is anyone out there who can help us, please respond. I repeat, please respond!"

George and I shared a look, wide eyes, before the old man scrambled out of his chair to the radio, grabbing the microphone.

"Charles, this is George Wallace. We read you, over!"