

It didn't take long for me to run into trouble.

Twenty minutes after I left, about a quarter of the way to my destination and just passing the high school, I was forced to stop at a four-way intersection. The road was a mass of cars and accidents, with two cars absolutely wrecked and several more with varying amounts of damage. It was clear the two wrecked cars had collided at full speed or near it, while the rest of the cars were damaged when trying to avoid getting caught up in the accident.

All of that meant nothing to me, of course. What was actually important was that one of the cars was being ransacked by a trio of the large horned felines I had seen around. It took me a second to realize what they were trying to do before finally sitting in the front seat. The feline monsters were wholly focused on their task and the potential for food, trying to pry open the windows and get at the driver.

As I watched, something inside me seemed to stir, getting stronger and stronger. These animals, these monsters, had taken over our world, killed who knows how many people that survived whatever the hell had turned so many people to dust, were so confident of their safety they weren't even paying attention.

Rage swirled in my chest, and I struggled to contain myself. The world was dying around me, and as much of a chance as the bastion and Sally had given me, there were so many people I would never get to save. I closed my eyes and let out a long, slow breath. I needed to control myself before I did something stupid before I got myself killed, avenging the whole world.

Then I opened my eyes and saw them pull a much smaller corpse out of the back seat, and I was moving across the empty part of the street before I could even think, something inside me snapping. My machete was out and held at the ready as I moved as fast as I could while still staying low, getting as close as I could before....

With a silent snarl, I sprinted the remaining distance, slamming my machete along the spine of the closest feline monster. It screeched and yowled, but my blow had done plenty of damage, so when it tried to whirl around on me, it simply flopped a bit, falling off the car. I turned to face the next closest horned feline, managing to slash at its head as it tried to jump off the crumpled hood of the car, its claws scratching against the metal. My blade bit into the side of its skull and eye, dazing the creature and letting me slide out of the way, the feline flipping over as I yanked my machete free. I managed to drive my boot hard enough to crack its ribs before it could fully recover, the monster heaving as it tumbled across the street.

The third and final creature came around the car at a sprint, spitting mad and focused entirely on me. I tried to turn and bring my weapon up to catch the creature as it jumped at me, but I was too slow. Just before it could leap and wrap its jaws around my arm, a crude spear slammed into the feline monster's side, pinning it to the car. The single blow must have done some pretty severe damage, because it only struggled for a few seconds before going limp.

I took a step back, the spear having come out of nowhere as far as my own awareness was concerned, my brain trying to catch up with the last few seconds. I opened my mouth, focusing on the young man holding the spear, only to catch movement out of the corner of my eye.

I shifted slightly and kicked the charging monster, knocking it off its feet. I followed up with a stomp, then a second and a third, my heel cracking the large feline monster's skull, the creature finally shuddering before going still. I let out a long breath of relief, turning around to find the young man who had come to my aid was already in the process of finishing off the creature I had maimed with my first strike. When he was done, he focused on me. Both of us were silent for a long moment before he finally spoke up.

"You can keep the two you killed," He said, "But I need to go back with something."

It took me a second to decipher what he meant, but when I realized he was talking about the creature corpses, I looked down at them and shivered.

"Are they safe to eat?" I asked, looking back up at him to find he was wrapping a cloth around the one he had killed, tying it up assumedly for easier transportation.

"Yeah, these and the lizard ones are, at least," He said with a shrug. "Word of advice, save the cans and everything shelf stable for the winter. It's going to be rough."

"Yeah... that was the plan. Listen... I have a safe place, somewhere that can hold a lot of people," I explained. "Running water, working electricity-"

"... gonna offer me candy from a white van, too?" He asked, suddenly looking at me warily. "I'm not interested, thanks."

"Look, you can have all three of these. We don't need them quite yet," I explained. "With working electricity, our perishable food is still good. But I'm serious about having a safe place."

"Where?" He asked, eyes looking down at the dead creatures and then back up at me.

"I... if it was just me staying there, I wouldn't mind telling you, but I have an injured mother and her young daughter staying with me," I explained with a wince. "I could lead you there? I need to go grab some stuff first, but... when I'm done?"

He looked at me for a long moment, trying to figure out my angle. After the silence stretched for a while, I continued.

"Right now, the most important thing is sticking together. I'm not gonna try and force you to do anything, but at least let me show you," I added, before slowly raising my left arm into the

air, pulling up my jacket to reveal my pistol. "I'll even give you all of my ammo for this, so I won't even be able to force you."

The second his eyes locked onto my pistol, he tensed, his hand gripping his spear tightly. When I made no motion to go for my gun, he slowly eased up and eventually nodded.

"I'll bring it- I'll think about it. Are you going to come by here when you're done?"

"Probably not this spot exactly, not with all the fresh blood."

"Well... the ice cream shop, over in that direction," He said, pointing past the houses. "It's safe and nearby..."

"Yeah, alright. It'll probably be about half an hour, but I'll wait thirty minutes when I get there. If you don't show up by then, I'll assume you aren't interested."

He nodded and, after a few seconds, looked down at the dead creature by my feet and then back up at me. I nodded and stepped away, walking around him towards the tailor shop.

"I'll leave you to it. See you soon, hopefully."

I walked away slowly, walking backward at first until I was far enough away that I would have time to turn back around if he charged me. I wasn't overly worried that he would attack me, and I was pretty sure I could take him even without the gun at my hip, but acting brash, like he wasn't a threat, was probably an excellent way to make him *more* suspicious, oddly enough.

When I finally turned out of sight around a street corner, I picked up the pace, once again trying to balance stealth and speed. I passed through a backyard, cut through an alleyway, and walked around a heavily ransacked computer store before stopping along a new street, looking around cautiously for any new threats.

I could feel myself getting agitated, my body still feeling wired from fighting and *killing* the three cougar-sized felines. Plus, I knew I was getting closer and closer to the tailor's shop, so I would need to deal with any danger I spotted as I looted the shop. On top of that, I was also anxious to see whether or not the young man would show up. I was pretty sure he wasn't alone, considering his stumble over "I'll bring it up" and "I'll think about it," but I wanted to help either way.

After another ten minutes of sneaking around, I found the tailor's shop. Surprisingly, the front windows were actually intact, despite the shops on either side being smashed and ransacked. I peered in through the glass into the dark shop, debating whether or not I should just break the glass door to get in. After a minute of considering my options, I made up my mind and pulled away from the door, making my way around the building. I snuck through an alley, stumbling on what looked like employee parking, which was empty.

From there, it only took me a moment to find the back entrance, which was unfortunately locked. I pulled the crowbar from my backpack and jammed it into the doorframe, wincing as the sound of splintering wood filled the parking lot. With another shove, I managed to pop the doorframe enough to push the door open, allowing me to step inside the dark room. I quickly put away my crowbar and pulled out a flashlight, clicking it on to scan through the room as I pushed further in.

The doorway led into a stock room, which in turn led to a break room and then the store itself. Quickly, I walked through every room and checked every corner, thoroughly looking at every inch I could get to. I was not about to let my guard down and get ambushed because I forgot to check behind the door or under a table. When I was finally mostly confident I was alone, I returned to the front of the shop and put my bag on the counter, looking around the interior.

The shop, which I remembered going to when I was in high school for my prom tux, was halfway between a high-end clothes shop and a tailor, specifically for men. I remembered the man who owned the shop, an older man with a son who was a few years older than me.

Shaking my head to clear out the nostalgia, I pulled off my backpack and put that on the counter as well, opening it and looking around, trying to figure out what I would take. There was a surprisingly large selection of clothes, which only made the process more difficult. Normally, I couldn't afford to care that much about what I looked like, but for this jump, I needed to look my best.

Over the next fifteen minutes, I layered clothes into the bag, alternating between "normal" and fancy suit stuff, in an attempt to keep the important stuff safe. I ended up filling the duffel with jeans, shirts, a new leather jacket, suit jackets, pants, ties, and three pairs of shoes.

I kept the clothes meant for the Kingsmen jump simple. A dark blue jacket with matching pants, a white dress shirt, a dark red tie, and black loafers.

When the duffel bag was full, I started filling my backpack, basically just jamming less critical stuff in while also adding bits and pieces the store had been selling. I managed to put in a dozen watches, cufflinks, handkerchiefs, expensive pens and refills, lighters, belts, and even six sewing kits with buttons and other emergency things for fixing clothes.

When I was finally done, I zipped everything up and pulled my backpack on, giving the interior one more quick look, before walking back out the way I came. I pulled the door shut as best I could, jamming it shut in its slightly damaged frame.

Once I was out from behind the shop, I turned and looked up and down the street, checking it was clear before stepping out of the alleyway, heading directly for the road that would eventually lead me to the ice cream shop that the young man had mentioned. It didn't

take long for me to find, the spot was well known around town. I had even been there a few times in the last year or so.

When I arrived, it was apparent no one else was there since the building was a burnt-out husk. I couldn't help but shake my head when I saw it. Despite everything that was going on, the town losing such a staple was somehow still upsetting.

I had more important things to do than mourn a building, though, so I quickly climbed into the now cold husk of the building, pushing a spot behind a few broken appliances clear and sitting down, my presence hopefully covered by the scent of burning wood and plastic.

Time passed, and I struggled to stay alert and awake despite my increasing boredom. Eventually, I reached into my pack and pulled out one of the watches, fiddling with it while I waited. When, according to the watch, another twenty minutes had passed, I clicked my teeth and stood. I climbed out of the charred rubble and into the parking lot, spending a moment to orient myself before starting to walk away.

"Wait."

I stopped, whirling around to face whoever had spoken. Standing there was the same young man, plus a slightly older-looking woman, maybe around twenty. While the young man still had his spear, the woman had an old but perfectly serviceable-looking pump action shotgun. It wasn't aimed at me, but it was clearly held in such a way that it easily could be. After a long pause, I stood back up straight, making sure to keep my hand away from my pistol.

"Hello. My name is Aiden," I said simply.

"... Jessica," She responded. "You made Barry an offer earlier. Why?"

"We need to stick together," I explained. "Every person is important now. We need to keep close so we can support each other."

She watched me as I talked, tilting her head as I answered her question, almost chewing my words as she listened.

"You said you had a place with running water and electricity," She said when I finished, a statement rather than a question. "You got generators or something?"

"Something like that," I responded. "I've already got two people staying with me, a mother and a daughter. The mom is injured at the moment, but she should recover soon. She is a nurse."

"A nurse?" She asked, suddenly very focused on me, eyes locked on me. "Are you certain?"

“Yes... Do you have people who are injured?” I asked.

Again, there was a long pause. Finally, after a long moment, her general stance shifted, going from on edge and barely holding back violence to a much calmer demeanor, her weapon dipping to point to the ground.

“You're not wrong. With everything going to shit, we do need to stick together,” She finally said. “Take us to this safe space. If you're not lying, we can talk more then.”