

We left the restaurant about five minutes after dispatching the canine zombies, a heavy weight pressing down on the group. Logically, we knew that George was alive, especially since Barry had already died during the Die Hard jump. Despite that, waking up to him being mauled to death was obviously a shocking experience. In all honesty, I was only minorly worried about George. Sally had been pretty clear when she explained her ability to numb any experience that would leave lasting psychological damage.

What really pressed down me and, most certainly, my team was how brutal, sudden, and *violent* his death was. All of us were having flashbacks to the violent, brutal, and frequently *lethal* encounters we had with the monsters back home. George dying here sucked but from a utility perspective. What really sucked was how much that death reminded us of the genuine and near-constant threat back home.

Despite the streets being dark again, save for the still functioning but barely helpful street lamps, we pressed further and further through the city. As before, we leaved a trail of dead zombies behind us. It was strange how easily we were handling the zombies, since I knew just how lethal they could be from watching the video games and movies. Barry and I discussed it as we moved, talking in hushed tones.

"It's because we aren't really that scared," Barry guessed. "We've been dealing with worse stuff for a while now. It's hard to be scared of a few shamblers after killing raptors."

"But these things kill real, battle-hardened soldiers," I pointed out, jamming my spear back into a still struggling zombie, finishing it off. "Seal Team 6 types. Hard for me to imagine they are freaking out 'cause the guy slowly walking at them looks a bit rotten."

"... Maybe its the guns?" Barry suggested, stomping his most recent kill. "They all seem pretty insistent to use guns, and since we aren't, maybe we have an advantage?"

I opened my mouth to respond when Kate, who had stepped forward to double-check an alley Barry and I had walked past, cut in.

"It's the special monsters. Can't blame even special forces for breaking down when coming face to face with that tyrant thing you described," She suggested, and I nodded in at least partial agreement.

"That would make sense... the characters in the games only usually struggle with the unique monsters," I responded, stepping over my last kill, and scanning the street.

"The civilians panic when they see zombies, make stupid mistakes," She continued with a shrug. "But people who don't panic get overrun with monsters. Like the dogs."

I nodded, agreeing that it was likely as she suggested, or at least a mix of what we had all suggested. Silence covered the group again, hanging around for a while as we worked through another group of infected.

Hours passed, and by the time the sun began to rise, we had made it another mile. About that time was when the city began to thin out a bit, going from near-constant multi-story buildings to much more frequent homes and single-story businesses. Unfortunately, even as the rising sun made our lives safer, the zombie density seemed to rise. For some reason, perhaps because apartments were more difficult for zombies to wander out of, or perhaps because houses had more ground-floor windows, there was a significant increase in the number of zombies the further we got out of the city. Part of me wondered if the zombies had a purposely made wandering instinct built into them from the T-virus, designed to make them spread out completely rather than just turning a dense population area into zombie central and staying there.

It was a scary thought and would explain why the virus tended to spread out to whole cities. I did get the feeling that there were a lot more zombies inside the apartments, larger buildings, and more in the city. Out here, a lot of the zombies had stumbled their way out of their much more simple homes and onto the streets.

On average, by the time we had walked around six miles, we were killing ten or fifteen zombies on every street, close to twice the rate in the denser parts of the city.

As we cleared one of the lower-density streets at around noon, we walked by an SUV parked on the side of the road. Danny slowed down alongside it, carefully looking inside to see if there was anything interesting.

"We haven't seen anything blocking the road for a while," he pointed out. "Maybe it's time to get in a car."

"The whole city is in quarantine," I pointed out, shaking my head. "With any luck, they have missed us so far, but driving around is going to change that real quick."

He let out a sigh and nodded, and we continued to move. Not long after that, we stopped for a break, taking cover inside an overturned school bus, lying on its side with a crumpled hood. The inside was blessedly empty, so we crawled in through the emergency door in the back.

"Any thoughts on what the quarantine might be like, Kate?" I asked. "It's going to be the military doing it."

For a moment, she was quiet, looking back at me. It was hard to tell what she was thinking until she shrugged.

"It's likely multiple station points around the city, on major in and out streets. Probably have constant vehicle patrols along those roads," She said. "The quarantine line will probably be along existing roads around the city, makes it easier to patrol. What year is it?"

"1998," Dr. Salinado responded, her face blank. I couldn't help but wince at the blatant admittance that we weren't from around here or even around this time.

"Then there *might* be drones in the air, but that kind of depends on how close..." She trailed off as she noticed my look. "Right, sorry, shutting up now."

"It's fine, Kate. Okay, then we need to cross this line on foot since there is no way we can sneak a car past that. After that, we need to make our way to someplace that would have cars and drive out of here, probably on backroads or even off-road," I said, turning to everyone, focusing on Dr. Salinado last. "Does anyone have any ideas?"

The overturned bus was silent for a long minute before Dr. Salinado seemed to perk up a bit. She stayed quiet for another long minute before finally nodding. Clearly, she was thinking her idea through, and we all waited eagerly for it.

"There's a dock where you can rent boats, I think, another mile northeast," she explained, chewing her lip. "We could grab a couple of boats and paddle up the Mendez River. Eventually, there's a highway that crosses over it. We can climb up onto the road from there or follow along it. There are a couple of gas stations and fast-food joints along that road. If we are lucky, we might be able to find a car there."

"And if not?" Barry asked. "Lot to risk for a chance."

"If we don't find anything, we split up," I said. "One group backtracks along the road to find a vehicle or even steal one from the military. The other group keeps walking."

"What if we just follow the river?" Danny asked. "It's slower, but going with the flow will get us some good distance... right?"

"They will be watching the river," Kate said, shaking her head. "Probably have a group stationed along it just waiting."

"Plus, the Mendez curves back around the city," Dr. Salinado explained. "It would be a while before we actually left it behind."

"Yeah, we aren't going backward," I said. "We are going to have to risk it."

We spent a few more minutes resting, before slowly crawling out from our temporary cover. Even after clearing the area out before climbing inside, zombies had still started pushing

in, wandering around. As we stepped out, quite a few of them noticed us and started to shamble closer.

"Damn... alright, guys, let's do this. I want to be on the river by the time the sun sets."

With a target and time limit, we began to push northeast steadily. As before, it was slow going. At one point, as the sun began to get lower in the sky, we made a decision to speed up. In order to reduce the time spent killing zombies, we would reduce the range we would clear. It was risky since it would mean we needed to constantly be moving, and it increased the risk of zombies following and sneaking up on us, but I desperately did not want to be in the city on the third day. We only had a vague notion of when the bomb would hit, so I didn't want to even get close.

The pressure was on, and we pushed hard, eventually hitting the river. Once we did, we started following it vaguely North, looking for the dock that Dr. Salinado remembered.

It wasn't long after we started to move along the river that we were ambushed again.

They came out of nowhere, with no warning signs or clues, bursting from the back door of a home as we walked past. They charged at us, nearly a blur as they screeched and hissing. I barely had time to raise my spear before one of the tongues wrapped around it and tore it from my grip.

A pair of Lickers slammed into me and Barry, driving both of us to the ground.

As the one sitting on me snarled and snapped at me, I managed to somehow get my arm under its chin, slamming its head upwards and keeping it from biting me. Its tongue lashed out and slammed into my shoulder, trying to wrap around my arm, even as its own claws tore at my leather jacket. Just before the mutated monster could wrap its jaws around my throat, I could see movement behind it.

The creature screeched and jumped away, revealing Kate standing above me with a bloody spear. Ignoring the dull soreness radiating through the majority of my body, I quickly rolled to my feet and unslung my shotgun, raising it to my shoulder and firing it, driving a slug into the still-jumping licker.

The disgusting mutant tumbled, its left arm limp and useless. It still whirled around, its tongue lashing out, aimed directly at me. I wracked a new shell, but before I could fire, someone else pulled their trigger, blowing the creature's tongue off with their own blast of twelve gauge buckshot.

Now in serious pain, the creature let out a gurgling howl, squirming and trying to hobble away. It limped back, starting to turn when Kate charged in and leaped, landing on its back and driving her spear into its bulbous head.

The area was silent, and I turned back to look at Barry, already expecting the worst. Instead, I saw him yanking his spear free of the lick that had leaped on him before looking around for something to wipe his weapon off.

After a few seconds had passed and no one dropped dead or was jumped on by a third lick, I nodded.

"We just made a lot of noise. We need to move," I said, getting a lot of nods in return. "Jessica, check Barry for bites or cuts as we move. Danny, if you don't mind doing the same for me?"

We started to move, quickly following the river again. It was a bit awkward walking while carrying half of my clothes, Danny inspecting me for cuts or bites. Thankfully, he didn't find anything beyond some deep-growing bruises on my sides, chest, and shoulder. Jessica also turned up nothing after thoroughly searching for Barry. The young man's blush was pretty funny, though.

We made quick progress down the river, driven by the worry of giving our position away from our last fight and by our desire to get out of the city before sunset. Just as we began to question if we had somehow missed or skipped the dock, we finally spotted it in the distance.

On fire.

"You've got to be fucking shitting me," I said when I realized that the building quickly burning down was the exact building we had been looking for.

We rushed to the small business, the front sign falling off as we approached. It was a fiery mess that was hot even from where we were standing in the street. For a moment, we all stood in front of the burning building, wondering what we were going to do next when Kate made a noise and darted off. I cursed as she ran, quickly following after her. The retired soldier made her way along the side of the burning building before stopping suddenly. I strangled a shout as she climbed up a fence and ran towards the fire before I finally realized what she had seen. A stack of canoes lined up along the wooden dock, far enough from the fire that they weren't burning themselves yet.

Keyword being yet, as they begin to show signs of heating up.

Seeing that she had a target, I rushed forward as well, both of us grabbing different boats and hauling them away from the fire. While they weren't on fire, they were still hot, and I could feel my fingers burning as we quickly moved away, the fire cooking us alive at such close range.

Once we were far enough away from the fire, we both nearly dropped the boats, both of us barely holding back curses and shouts of pain. The rest of the group caught up with us, and while Jessica checked the burns on my hand, Danny fretted over Kate. Once everyone had calmed down, and we spent a few minutes making sure we hadn't attracted a hoard, we inspected our hasty haul by the light of the burning boat rental building.

"They don't seem to be damaged, maybe a little warped," Barry said as Jessica wrapped my right hand with a torn piece of cloth. "But what about paddles?"

"We can keep to the shallows and use our spears," I said, wincing as I squeezed my hands, testing how much functionality I had lost. It hurt, but I would still be able to contribute

"Like gondolas," Jessica said, and I nodded.

"Exactly. It's going to be a bit tight with all of us in two of these," I said, taping one of the canoes with my foot. "But it should be possible as long as we stay calm and don't move around."

Once the canoes had cooled, we carried them down to the edge of the river, climbing in one by one. Dr. Salinado passed Amanda to me, which was the first time she had released her daughter since we had been rudely awoken by the pack of infected canines. The young girl was tired, her eyes were red and slightly swollen, and when her mom climbed into the boat, she immediately dove for her, almost tipping the slightly overloaded canoe. Luckily, Barry saw it coming and was able to compensate.

Once everyone was in one of the boats, we started the journey upriver, pushing off of the river bank. Each of us used our spears to push and guide us along the water, going at a decent speed. Slowly but surely, as we moved, the sun set, and darkness swallowed us. If it had been hard to see in the city, it was damn near impossible here. We did have flashlights, but we dared not use them since we had no idea how closely the rivers were being watched.

Soon, we had left the city behind, pushing our boats upstream, working together to keep a steady pace. As we got further and further away, the tension of constant threats, of zombies and monsters in every corner, slowly uncurled. It was probably stupid of us to let go so early, but we had spent the last two days wholly clenched, always on the lookout, always worried about what was going to happen next. Given the opportunity to let that go was too tempting for our minds.

Eventually, we arrived at the bridge, slowly stopping beside it. We dragged the canoes up along the shore, hiding them directly under the bridge before we made our way around it. Rather than climb onto the road, we walked through the woods beside it, just far enough that the lights that ran along its side made it easier to see where we were going. We walked and walked, making up a significant amount of distance. Twice, we had to dive for cover as helicopters flew over us, or Humvees drove past, most likely scanning for people like us. By some miracle, they didn't spot us, or at least they didn't send anyone after us.

You could feel the morning approaching, ending what had been a long, hard night when we finally spotted the first of a few roadside service stations. I had been nervous that the infection had spread out this far since I knew that a gas station along the outskirts of the city had been infected. Luckily, this gas station and the connected diner seemed to have been evacuated rather than quarantined. The parking lot was empty, but around the back, we found a single vehicle, an old beat-up four-door car. A quick, rather nerve-racking search of the gas station later, and we had a pair of keys.

We pulled out of the gas station at a good speed, my hands gripping the steering wheel quite a bit tighter than was probably necessary. The car was packed, but we had managed to fit everyone, even if a few people would have sore necks and dead legs.

After nearly three hours of constant driving, the sun finally climbed over the trees, peeking up to brighten up the long road we were on. For the first time in a few days, the sky was clear.

Suddenly, a low rumble reverberated through the car, and I slowed the vehicle to a stop. We stepped out of the car and turned back in the direction of the city, watching as a huge explosion started rising above the treeline.

"Well... that's it then," I said, turning to face Dr. Salinado. "You should be good now. Just keep driving for a while longer. Maybe find someone who will lie for you, claim you've been away on vacation, or something. Either way, this is where we part ways."

"Thank you, all of you," The doctor said, tearing her eyes away from the rising cloud of dust and fire so she could look at each of us. "I cannot tell you how much this means to me. I... Thank you."

"You're welcome, Doctor," I said, helping her back into the car, her daughter asleep in the back seat. "Good luck with whatever comes next."

"I won't waste this chance you've given me, Aiden," She said, giving me one final hug before climbing into the driver's seat.

"I know," I said with a smile. "Stay safe!"

She returned the smile before starting the car and pulling away, leaving my team standing in the road. We all watched her drive away, waiting for the sensation of returning to our reality to start.

"...Wouldn't it be awkward as hell if our mission wasn't over?" Barry said as the beat-up car disappeared around a distant corner. "We would have to catch up with her, try and figure out why the mission isn't over, and-"

As Barry talked, I started getting nervous that his joke was true, as we still hadn't started to fade. Thankfully, before he could finish, the flickering started, and we finally went home.