

I pulled myself out of the torn apart Ford Explorer I'd been searching through, and looked out over the rest of the caravan. Each of the vehicles was the same: drained of fuel and stripped of whatever it was they had been carrying. Whoever had been driving these was gone.

A couple cars ahead of me was another man, also searching. I'd picked him up before I left Roseburg. I didn't do names anymore, so I just called him Redding, by where he was heading.

I walked up to where he was searching. "Looks like they've cleaned the whole thing out." I said, "Come on. We should go in case something else comes along." He just nodded and closed the car's door. This one had its hood caved in, down through the engine block. Something, or someone, strong had hit them.

"What did that, do you think?" Redding said as we stepped in front of it. There was fear in his eyes, or maybe just anticipation, I couldn't tell.

"Did you notice that it was only the car in front? And that the center was only about this big?" I said, holding up my fist in front of him.

"Wait, a person did that?" he asked, bewildered.

I just nodded. Things were getting worse in the wastes, and the people that lived out here were getting stronger, and

more dangerous. He let out a quick breath and stood up straight. Hopefully he wouldn't have to see any of those people.

We left the caravan behind, and pushed on down the road. The air was still here, but you could feel the lingering energy in it. We were closer to the convergence point than I would have liked, but with bandits catching on to couriers' usual routes, I was left with little choice.

As we walked, there was a crack of wood just beyond the tree line. I raised my hand to stop Redding and drew my bow. A second passed before the head of a rabbit poked out from behind a tree. The tension left my chest, but I kept my breath steady as I pulled back the string. I released and the arrow flew through the air, finding its mark. The rabbit bolted and disappeared deeper into the forest, my arrow stuck through its side.

I sprinted off the road and into the woods after it. It was quick, but it wouldn't be able to go much further. The forest floor kicked up under my feet as I dodged between the trees, keeping the animal in sight.

It didn't take long for it to collapse. There were two rows of bone-white fins along the rabbit's back. Mutated, but still edible. It wasn't much, but it would be enough for the two of us. I picked it up and strapped it to my bag.

Redding caught up behind me, breathing heavily. "Wow. They said you were fast. But damn." He was hunched over, holding his knees. I probably shouldn't have left him behind on the road.

The sun was setting, and I could see dark clouds rolling in. "Let's get back on the road." I said, "There's a town coming up we can stay in tonight."

#

The rain caught up to us as we neared the town. It was freezing and pelted my face, but it was comforting knowing it would help hide us. We hadn't seen any more signs of whoever had looted the caravan, but I wasn't going to let my guard down.

It had been a few months since I last passed through, but nothing had changed here. The wastes were practically frozen in time. We passed by the faded pink walls of Phil's Frosty, a small stand in the parking lot of the town's market. I'd found myself in there once, hoping for something sweet before I died. That had been a terrible run.

There was a lodge on the opposite end of town. Two stories, which was ideal, I hated sleeping on the ground floor. The place was only a stones' throw from the river too, so we'd be able to make a break for the woods if we needed.

We walked in silence as we made our way there. Redding

would occasionally look over at me, but when I glanced back, he'd just stare forward. He had a worried look on his face. I couldn't blame him. Every window could have someone behind it watching us, every street could have something waiting for us.

We made it to the lodge without incident though. I opened the front door slowly and stepped into the lobby. Redding stayed behind as I did a quick sweep of the place. There weren't any rooms on the first floor, just a large lobby and dining area beyond the office. In the back of the lobby was a fireplace and two sets of stairs leading to the second-floor balcony.

I crept up the stairs, wincing at every creak. Even with the rain battering the building, the sound pierced the air. If there was anything in here, it wasn't showing itself. I kept my knife drawn as I opened every door, ready for whatever might be on the other side.

When I opened the next door, there was a loud crash from inside. I jumped back, knife held forward. I held my breath and strained to see further into the dark room. A moment passed and then an opossum dashed between my legs and down the stairs. Redding yelled out below, and I heard the front door open.

Redding was still standing there, hand to his chest. "Sorry, that gave me a quick scare." He said.

I laughed and sheathed my knife. "Don't worry, that was our only other guest, we're good."

We built a fire in the dining room and cooked the rabbit. Its hide had been tough, and I had to work my way around the fins, putting them in my pack as I removed them.

We ate in silence for a while, before he finally broke it. "Back out there, with the rabbit, I've never seen someone move that fast. You're one of them, aren't you? You were caught in a convergence?"

So that explained the staring. I nodded, taking another bite. The meat was firm, and I had to chew for a bit before I answered him. "Yeah, I am, but I wasn't in a zone when it all happened. I was at work, this little diner just outside of Eugene, it barely missed me."

It had only been a few years since the event, and people still didn't know much about it. For the most part, people thought you only developed the mutation if you were there in the zones when they appeared.

"I'm not sure myself," I continued, "but I think just being out here in it changes you, kinda like radiation or something." He looked alarmed at that, but I just raised my hands. "Don't worry, I've been doing this for a while. You aren't going to grow a third arm just taking one trip through the shit."

He eased up a little bit, cracking a smile. It disappeared a moment later, and he let out a low sigh. "I was lucky too. I actually lived in Redding, that's why I'm heading back that way. I was visiting family up here at the time, and one thing led to another, and I just never managed to get back."

He was lucky. Central Cali was hell, one of the worst parts of the wastes. Most couriers refused to run the route, making Southern California a sort of island.

Redding kept going, clearly having held back a lot on our walk here. "What does it feel like? When you do it? I've heard about it, but I've never actually met someone that can."

"Like someone shooting electricity through your body." I said. "There's pain. I got used to it, but it's still there." He looked away for a moment, maybe embarrassed for asking. "It's fine though, it's just another part of life out here now. Let's get some rest, I'll take first watch."

We cleaned up our things and put out the fire before going upstairs to a room at the front of the building. I spread out my sleeping bag in front of the window and leaned up against the wall. Redding set up near the door and passed out within minutes. A journey like this was exhausting, especially when you weren't used to it, and he still had a long way to go, but I'm sure he knew that.

I sat there for a couple hours, listening to the growing storm and occasionally checking out the window. I opened my pack to find something to occupy my hands. The package was nestled safely on top of everything, a plain metal tin sealed tightly. It was handed off to me in Roseburg before I left, and all I knew was that it was vital it reach the camp in Yreka. I hadn't opened it, I found it easier when I didn't know what I was carrying. All that mattered was that I didn't fail the delivery. I'd never do that again.

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There was a heavy thud from downstairs, shaking me from my thoughts. The front door. Redding snapped up, looking towards me with wide eyes. I just gestured to hit to keep calm. Maybe the wind had just blown it open. I moved slowly across our room towards the door and eased it open.

"Get that damn door closed, I'm freezing." I heard someone say from downstairs.

Shit. I inched the door back shut against the gusts of wind, my body tensing at the final click of it. Why did they have to come here of all places? Had they seen the smoke from our fire? Or maybe we were just incredibly unlucky. I tried to not look panicked as I moved back towards Redding.

"People downstairs." I whispered. I nodded towards the window, "We need to get outside." We wouldn't be able to go

out the door without getting spotted, and they were bound to check out this room if we stayed. There was nowhere to hide in here.

I couldn't tell how many of them were downstairs, but I could hear the muffled sounds of them talking. There were at least five different voices.

I stepped over to the window and gave it a small lift to test it. There was some resistance, but it shifted a small bit. I waved Redding over. He carefully picked up his bag and joined me at the window. Once I started to open it, the scraping of the wood was grating in my ears, every sound threatening to give us away. The window opened wide enough for us to get through, the wind sending the curtains into a frenzy.

The rain had left the roof slick, but we would have to manage. The street seemed clear, so I sent Redding through. He moved as quietly as he could, but it still felt like he was slamming the tiles as he found his footing. I handed him my bag first, lifting it high to clear the windowsill.

We eased it through, keeping it as steady as we could. My arms were straining once they were fully outstretched. Once it was through the window, Redding gave me a quick nod, but he wasn't ready for the full weight of the bag when I let go of my end. It hit the tile and started to slide past him. He



slipped as he scrambled for one of the straps and I watched in slow motion as both him and the pack went over the edge.

There was a dull thud as he hit the concrete. The voices downstairs stopped. Damn it, they'd definitely heard that. I crawled through the window onto the ledge. I couldn't leave him, or my bag, out there for the scavs. I looked over the edge and saw Redding below, groaning and clutching his arm.

"Get up." I hissed at him. I don't think he could hear me over the storm, but he had started worming his way towards the building. My bag was still there, in clear view of the lodge's front door.

I couldn't drop down for it if someone was coming to check out the noise, and I couldn't stay here either, they'd see me when they stepped outside. I shuffled along the ledge towards the side of the building, and the front door opened as I reached the end. I dropped my legs over the side and slowly lowered myself until I was close enough to let go, crouching behind the edge of the lodge's porch.

I heard the footfalls on the wood. It was too late to do anything for Redding, I just had to wait and see what happened. I peeked around the corner for a second and saw he had managed to get up against the porch.

The man on the porch came down the stairs, his steps slow and deliberate. He walked straight towards my pack and bent

down to pick it up. When he turned around, he jumped back and dropped it, drawing a long knife from his belt. "Hey boss!" he yelled out, "We got someone here!"

Another set of footfalls came from inside the lodge.

"What're you sayin' out here, Ben?"

"A guy here boss."

There was a pause, and then a deep laugh. "Well hello little lamb." The boss' voice was rumbling. There was power behind it. I had no doubt he was mutated, and he probably wasn't the only one. "What're ya doin' out here? You didn't wanna say hi to us?"

Redding didn't respond. I didn't peek around the corner again, I couldn't risk it.

"Get on up now." The second man said. "We can't have ya sleepin' out here. You got any friends ya want me to meet?" I heard some rustling and a cry from Redding. "Get his bag, I wanna see what he brought us."

The three of them walked back up into the lodge, and the door closed.

I sat there for a minute. I couldn't wait here for them to leave, they were probably taking the place for the night. There was a house across the street. I could wait them out there. I couldn't leave the package behind, and I couldn't leave Redding to them. He'd trusted me to watch his back.

Sneaking across the street was easy. The group inside was likely preoccupied with searching the rest of the lodge. I had to trust that Redding wouldn't give me away. The door into the house was locked, so I channeled energy into my legs. The storm covered the sound as I kicked the door in.

I spent the rest of the night at the living room window, watching the front of the lodge.

The rain had stopped by the morning, and as the sun came up, the first of them came out. The rest of the group -- I counted eight -- followed shortly after, and to my relief, one of them was pulling along Redding, who was still holding his arm to his chest. On his back was my bag.

Now I just had to figure out how to get them both back.

I watched the bandits walk away from the lodge, heading north along the road. At the least, I was glad we hadn't pushed further the day before, or we would have run into them in a much worse position.

I couldn't start following them immediately, it was too risky. It was likely they were staying somewhere nearby that I hadn't noticed on the way to the town. It was easy to forget just how many people lived deep in the woods before everything happened.

Half an hour later, I left the house and started to follow. I pushed power down through my legs and into the

ground, lighting up my nerves and tensing my muscles. In a few moments, I was able to clear the town, the sights flashing past me, with the final pink streak of Phil's marking the end of it. I had seen no sign of them still there, so they must have gone into the forest. I scanned the sides of the road for anything that might give them away, with the morning sun high enough now to let me look far into the trees. Right then, there was nothing to see, and I couldn't hear anything other than the distant warbling of birds.

About two miles outside of town, off the side of the road, there was a clear depression in the forest floor. A lot of bodies had broken off and trampled their way through. They didn't seem to be trying to hide their tracks, so Redding probably still hadn't told them I was with him.

Or they wanted me to come.

I shook my head. I couldn't think like that. Even if they wanted me to come after them, and even if they were ready for it, I couldn't just turn back. I had a responsibility.

I followed the trail deeper into the trees, stepping lightly to avoid disturbing anything else. I stopped using my powers. I'd heard rumors of people and creatures changed by the convergence being able to sense others using it.

A couple times, I lost the trail as the floor grew harder, less likely to give, but I was able to pick it up

again nearby. Another hour passed before I saw the trees ahead begin to part, and then suddenly stop. I came up to the edge of the tree line and looked down into a small valley, where at the bottom a solitary sawmill sat dormant.

Of course this is where they were staying. There were plenty of mills out here, and they were made sturdy, it was an ideal base. It was hard to make out anything from here, but there was definitely movement around the place.

How was I supposed to make it down there without anyone seeing me? There wasn't any cover between me and the mill, and it was a long way down. I couldn't see into the building at all, so there was no telling how many could be posted up watching the hills around the place.

Nighttime was still far away, and there was no knowing what would happen to Redding between now and then. If I was going to get down there, it had to be soon. I could just go for it, guns blazing. Just without any guns. No, that was suicide without knowing how many people were inside. I just needed a moment, but how would I make one without my things.

I looked around the sawmill again, and along the trees surrounding it, then a plan came to me. It was stupid and reckless, but it would have to work.

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I circled the sawmill until I arrived at the steepest

hill I could see. It was a far tumble from the tree line to the ground below, perfect for what I needed. There were a few trees right at the edge of it, and I stepped up to the smallest of them, placing my hand on it. I bowed my head and took a deep breath. This had to work.

I exhaled, and started to channel power through my chest and into my arms. The running I had figured out, I knew how to move the energy, but this was still different enough to give me trouble. I focused everything I had and planted my feet into the ground at the base of the tree, sparing a little for them to hold steady.

Then I pushed. I put all of my force into the base of the tree, and the bark bit into my hands. I strained against the tree and it still didn't move. I tried to strengthen my arms even more, moving more energy through them than ever before.

I heard a creaking sound from the tree. It was working. That sound filled me with determination, the momentum was all I needed to make this work. I dug my feet deeper into the ground and gave it everything I had.

The tree began to noticeably tilt towards the hill, and before I knew it, I had it as far as it needed to go. It began to tilt further with the force of its own weight, its roots ripped out of the ground around me. I stumbled backwards as it accelerated, and then with a massive crash, it hit the ground

and began rolling towards the mill.

I had to move now to make it worth it. I took off as fast as I could back into the woods, circling to the opposite end of the mill. The tree was still on its thunderous tumble down the hillside, which would hopefully give them all something to look at. I looked down at the mill and spotted an alcove in the wall, nestled between two beams.

It was now or never. I broke from the tree line, moving as quickly as I could while keeping my footing on my way down. My eyes flicked back and forth between the alcove and the windows I could see from here. There was no one in them. After what felt like an eternity, I made it to the wall, slowing myself so I didn't slam into the wall. With how quickly I'd been moving, I wouldn't be surprised if I burst straight through it.

I was breathing heavily. Even with the power, I was exhausted. I just needed to sit here a moment, and figure out where I was going next. From here, I could hear voices outside, but they were too distant to make out. The tree had stopped, and the valley started to quiet again.

There was a door into the building I was against not much further down. I crept towards it and tested the handle. Unlocked. The door opened with only a small sound of resistance, and I was able to slip inside. It was dark, the

only light in the space coming from the high windows. It was enough to move without running into anything.

No one was in here, the place was just filled with discarded bits of wood. I found one that seemed sturdy enough that I could actually hold. It was little more than a crude bat, but it was something.

There was another door on the opposite end of the building, this one looking into the center area of the mill. It had a small window on it, which was shattered. I let out a quick breath and stood up to look out of it. The area in front of the building was wide open, a sort of central courtyard for the other parts of the mill. There were a few rusted out industrial vehicles, and at least a couple trucks that still seemed functional. Opposite me, I could see people filing in and out of another building, a couple here and there. That had to be where I'd find my things, and Redding if I was lucky.

I'd have to use the trucks for cover if I was going to make it. There were a few piles of logs here and there, but those were up against the walls, I wouldn't be able to hide behind them very well. I gripped my makeshift weapon. There was a good chance this would turn into a fight. Could I really hope to just sneak under their noses, in and out with someone in tow?

Was this worth it? The doubts were starting to creep into



my mind. I could just call this delivery a bust. It would hurt my rep, but that was a small price compared to my life. I looked back towards the door I'd come in.

No. I'd followed them here, hadn't I? I was in their home. I was committed at this point, I needed to do this. I couldn't just leave. I took a deep breath and held it for a moment, letting it out slowly.

I opened the door and made for the first truck, keeping low and moving as quickly and quietly as I could. I watched every angle I could, though I knew as I was missing some in my rush. There was no yelling as I reached the truck, no movement. I took a peek underneath to figure out where I needed to go next.

I slipped around the truck and made for the next one. As I neared it, I caught sight of someone upstairs out of the corner of my eye. In a panic, I lost my footing on the gravel and hit the ground. I was able to pick myself back up and make it to my cover. I heard a confused grunt from near the main building.

Shit. Shit shit shit. There wasn't anywhere to go. Whoever that was had to be looking this way. I just sat there trying to hold my breath steady. Maybe they'd think nothing of it. The sound of gravel crunching under boots coming towards me scattered that hope.

As the steps neared, I braced myself against the tire, my whole body tensed. The man's head appeared from around the edge of the truck, and I launched towards him. His eyes went wide as I swung out from behind the truck, driving the wood into his face with everything I had. The force of the blow took him off of his feet and he flew backwards, slamming against the ground.

"Hey!" someone yelled out. Damn it, I'd been hoping to at make some ground before everything fell apart. Just my luck. "Hey I said! Whoever is back there come on out!" I could hear other voices, people were coming to see what the commotion was.

There was nowhere else to hide, just trucks and wood. All I was left with was running or fighting, and I wasn't leaving my things behind. I shook out my arms and tried to calm myself. I gripped my bat and bolted towards the source of the voice.

As I came out from behind the truck, I was staring at a man with a rifle held high, and I'd barely redirected myself before he pulled the trigger. I was fast enough to dodge to the side, but the ringing in my ears almost made me fall to the ground. I nearly ran into another bandit as he came out of the main building, and I knocked him to the ground as I ran past towards the nearest cover.

I stopped behind one of the piles of logs, the bandit continuing to shoot towards me, sending wood chips flying around my head. Guns. How did they have guns? It might just be the one, but even that was rare.

I could hear a lot more people now walking out, though I didn't know just how many. The shooting stopped for a moment, and I took the chance. I could make it back to the building I came through, and maybe take them on in a closed area. I ran out from behind the logs, throwing my weapon towards where I'd heard the gunfire last with all my strength. It flew across the clearing, and while I didn't look back to see, I could hear the thud of it connecting and the grunt of the man as it dropped him.

I slid along the ground behind the next cover. "Fucker caved him in, get his ass!" someone said. Gunfire echoed against the walls again as they continued to blast at me.

"Stop!" someone said. It was coming from high up, I couldn't see who it was. Everything grew quiet, save for the sound of my heavy breathing. I wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer.

"Hey courier!" the voice called out from above. I recognized the gravel in it now, it was the man from the lodge, their leader. "You've got the gift, haven't ya? I can see it in the way you move. Why don't ya come on out and give

us a little show 'fore I kill you and your lamb?"

I tried to steady myself. There was just one thing left up my sleeve. That arcane energy still pulsed in my chest. I pulled in a deep breath, and it swelled with me. I let the breath out and ground my feet into the gravel.

I pushed the power not just to my legs, but to every part of my body. I felt it flow through me, and even in this moment, I felt invincible. I dashed forward and leaped into the air. I cleared the truck completely and time slowed down as I soared upwards. I could see them all now, they had me surrounded.

As I reached my apex in the center of the clearing, I threw my arms wide and forced the energy within me outwards. It surged from my chest out along my arms and legs, and didn't stop there. The air cracked as lightning arced from me to everything in sight. Tendrils struck some of the bandits, dropping them instantly as they tried to run for cover. It buzzed up the sides of the buildings around me, the popping from the hits deafening.

I could hear myself screaming, but it felt like I was somewhere else far away, within the core of energy in my chest. It was fading, I could feel it. I didn't have much longer.

Suddenly my body froze, all of my muscles holding tight,

and my mind was pulled back into reality, catching the tail end of my yell. For a moment, I thought I'd broken my body with the power. I couldn't turn my head to look around, but I could still see the destruction. Streaks of black snaked up the side of the building in front of me, and the wall was even melted in some parts. Bandits were on the ground, motionless.

There was something different inside of me, an energy that was not my own, and as I tried to figure out what it was, I was jerked up into the air towards the top of the mill.

Their leader stood at the top, his hand outstretched towards me. He laughed, looking at me with what felt like glee. "Consider me entertained courier. It seems you aren't the only one that's special." He said to me with an exaggerated wink. He drew his hand towards his body and I started to float through the open air towards him. I had never seen anything like this.

As I drew in close, I could feel his breath waft over me, carrying the scent of rot. His graying hair curled down past his ears. His skin was rough and aged, and across his left cheek, I could see four lines running from eye to jaw. Cougar. I knew his face, and right then, I could see he knew mine.

"Well I'll be damned." He said to me, grinning from ear to ear. "Howdy Dallas."

Fuck.