

Two: After

He waited atop the corrugated tin awning, pressed flat against the rusted metal as the afternoon sun beat down. He'd shimmied up the stand-pipe to the right of it as soon as he'd heard the shambling footsteps around the corner, just able to clear the top of the awning and lay down on it before two of the veg-heads made their slow way around the corner of the building. The rusting metal was uncomfortably hot against his exposed skin.

He looked down at them as they tottered slowly along the sidewalk towards the shaded area below him, dusty gray eyes staring and empty. If not for the cracked, gray skin and signs of damage and ruin inked like three-dimensional tattoos across their bodies, they might have been two friends heading downtown.

They kept pace with each other, and chose to stay on the sidewalk, instead of wandering into the street. He wondered whether that meant there was something still in there somewhere. Some vestigial bit of what they'd been before, making its way along dim and corrupt pathways within.

He wished, not for the first time, that there was some way for him to tell if they were the fast ones or the slow ones. Audra could tell, but he never let her come on these outings. If he could've determined that these were the slow ones, he could have grabbed his salvage bag without this vertical diversion,

and trotted off down the street without a look back as their snarls of hunger and frustration fell further and further behind.

But he couldn't, and the fast ones were *really* fast. He'd out-run them several times before, but only because he was quicker around corners, and even then only a shift had saved him the last time. In a straight line, he didn't stand a chance, and not just because they didn't tire out. It seemed like they could hear or see or smell way better than the slow ones. Hell, better than him. If they could track you in whatever way they did, they didn't stop. Not ever.

The two below passed out of sight below the awning, the occasional low growl drifting upwards.

The wait frustrated him, as it always did. Time outside was always a roll of the dice against whether Audra would elect to follow the rule or not. Most of the time, he could count on her to stay put.

But the uncertainty of her piled up against him in moments like this, like flood-water, the wait bombarding him with an incessant flow of doubt.

As he waited, baking on the tin sheet jutting out above the sidewalk, the cascade of frustration headed in the inevitable direction, and anger began to supersede it. His lifetime's walk under the thumb of Ursa Major, and then the apocalypse, and then

the things that came after carried a cumulative weight now. It was a weight that bore down hard, and almost always required a kinesthetic response. He couldn't deny it this time, either.

He grabbed the edge of the awning, and swung himself over the edge, arcing downward as he let go. He landed on his feet with only the soft scuff of his shoes on the concrete to mark it, and stepped quietly to his salvage bag resting against the store-front brick under the awning, as the two figures ahead stopped, hesitating slightly before they began to turn.

*Slow ones. Could've been done already,* he thought, as he drew the Ka-Bar knife from the sheath at its side, and leapt forward.

He took the first before it had even turned ninety degrees, severing the spinal cord with a quick stab through the rear of the neck. It dropped to the sidewalk as he withdrew the blade, turning to the other. This one had just started to raise a hand toward him, still not quite at one-eighty when he duplicated the strike, this time straight through the neck.

It collapsed at his feet without a sound, too.

He only spared it a moment's consideration. It was like every other time, where inert finally laid claim to the advertising.

He picked up his pack, and sheathed the knife. It was time to see where the Audra die had landed, and what number was visible.