

Six: During

He held perfectly still, standing behind the dumpster as the police car skidded around the corner into the alley. The tires howled as the back end swung wide, but the driver recovered, straightening the car's trajectory even as it screeched to a stop in front of the mass of bodies shuffling toward it from farther down the alley. The headlights washed through the group, casting stark shadows even as the red and blue LEDs strobed in quick succession.

Two officers exited the vehicle, shotguns swinging around quickly as they assumed defensive stances behind the open doors. The driver shouted at the approaching crowd. The fear in his voice was at odds with his commands.

"Stop! Disperse right now, or you will be fired upon!"

The mass of people moving toward the cruiser made no hesitation, and angry growls sounded from within the group as a number of individuals sprinted forward, breaking free of it as they closed on the police car. The officers opened up moments afterward, and he saw that these weren't deterrent rounds. These were the real deal, and expansive red blooms burst outward from the chests of those closing the fastest.

It didn't matter. These officers hadn't made the connection yet, and he watched it become the end of them. They were firing center mass, despite decades of exposure to a well-established

ethos dictating a different choice. Obviously, neither of them were fans of story, and dispatch clearly was still in the dark, despite nearly twenty-four hours of pandemonium. Did none of these people read, or go to the movies? He imagined the interchange in the space of a second.

"Dispatch, Unit Tango One Three. Be advised, multiple hostiles advancing our position. Deploying non-lethal deterrents."

"Unit Tango One Three. Don't be a moron. Zombies. Head-shots. That is all."

The driver inherited that legacy first, as the fastest of the runners shrugged off his first shot with almost no hesitation, despite the evaporation of the bulk of his chest cavity. The officer got off one more shot that shredded its shoulder in a red mist, but then it leaped through the open window frame, hands and mouth a three-point attack that carried the man backwards and downward, even as they ripped out the exposed throat between his chin and the upper boundary of his body armor.

His partner fared only slightly better, shifting aim at the last second to void the bulk of the closest runner's skull. The body slid to a halt not far from his open door, but two more closed the distance before he could re-aim, and they did what the first was unable to.

He decided at that point that elevation was more important than anything else, and broke stasis, climbing up onto the dumpster with as much stealth as he could manage. Once atop it, he looked upward to the edge of the loading dock over-hang. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to snag it, but he was out of time. The bulk of the group was still either actively tearing the cops apart, or trying to get to them past the ones that were, but several at the back of the crowd had noticed him, and were heading his way. One of them was sprinting, a severely damaged young woman that still managed to cover the distance in no time at all.

He almost fell as he leapt outwards and up, grasping the edge of the roof with one hand. He felt the metal flashing cut into his hand as he clamped down on it, and his body swung outward, stressing his grip and adding to the pain. Then he got his other hand up, and was able to pull himself up onto the roof. He turned, and stared down at the carnage below once he was upright, staunching the free flow of blood from his lacerated palm by pressing down on the wound with his other thumb.

There was not much left of the officers, now, and the mob was even now in motion, surging past the cruiser in search of more food. Several of them on the closest periphery stared up at him, arms and chins upraised, moaning aloud. He held still, and

they lost interest in mere moments as the movement of their peers caught their attention, and pulled them along and away with forward motion alone.

Soon, the last of them had passed from view, and the alley was empty save for the impotent remains of a now-displaced reality. He felt a realization take hold within him, even as the blue and red pulses below beat out an empty tempo against the back-trail of an already departed conqueror.

The land had dropped away. The river was temporarily free. He looked up, even as he struggled with what this actually meant.

She stood on the third-story balcony across from him. Her eyes were dark save the reflections of light from the cruiser. She had dogged him both in dreams, and in the waking hours since he'd first seen her. Her quiet assertion that he was going the wrong way had graduated from memory to mantra in the intervening months.

There was a sort of inevitability that filled him then, even as he heard her speak quietly across the distance between them. Her words carried the same sort of weight as his father's, but carried a spark of hope entirely divorced from the same. He was transfixed, caught between past, and present, and past. It was like shuffled cards, and the wait to see the one that would be turned face up.

"You're here. I knew you'd come."

And he knew it was true. The river poured then into its new course, now flowing in a different direction, its course forever corrected.

He grinned in delight.