

Four: after

He walked slowly along the tar and gravel roof of the grocery across the alley from the tenement, keeping his footsteps asymmetrical and unordered, stepping from the ball of each foot to heel to minimize the noise. He reached the edge and stopped, surveying the scene both above and below. Low growls from the small congregation of veg-heads bumping absently against the back fence wafted up to him in the late afternoon heat. He could see that all heads were upturned and arms extended, intent on the figure above and across from them.

Audra sat on the third floor patio, legs dangling from the patio edge, arms passed through the railing balusters and hands clasped together. Her head was tilted towards the sky, and she was singing one of many songs that she knew but he did not. Her voice wasn't loud, but the sound had carried far enough to call these flesh-eating faithful to the outer-most barrier, pressing themselves against the chain-link surrounding the back lot in apathetic attempts to bridge the gap between themselves and the sound and vibrations from the patio high above.

He waited to see if she would notice him, but she almost never did, so he didn't wait long. He back-tracked across the roof to the access ladder that would take him back down to the street, and descended, dropping the last six feet onto the concrete side-walk around the corner from the tenement. He

adjusted his salvage pack across his back, and then sprinted toward the back of Birkland's, crossing the mouth of the alley behind it in less than three seconds and reaching the end of the block in less than twice that.

He slowed to a walk as he rounded the corner, watching intently down the block in front of the buildings to see if there was any movement.

Nothing moved along the block, so he made his way to the gap between his building and the one that preceded it, hopping the low front fence in one smooth motion. He was through the dust patch of a yard, and in the shadow between the two in less than ten steps, and slowed then, listening.

He could hear the veg-heads at the back-lot fence, but nothing else of consequence. Audra had obviously reached the end of her performance. That, or she was between numbers at the moment.

He stepped up onto the foundation sill of the building to his right, and then hopped across the intervening gap between it and the nearest first floor window of his building. The glass was long gone, and allowed him to come to rest half-in and half-out of the opening. He stretched upward from his crouch, using the top of the frame as an anchor. The extension gave him just enough reach to grasp the bottom of the fire escape ladder.

He swung outward, and chinned himself up, and then caught the second rung with a quick over-hand reach. The ladder held firm in place, as he'd pinned the drop mechanism closed long ago. A few more upward pulls, and his feet found the bottom rung, and he continued up, passing the second floor landing and continuing on up to the third.

He made as little noise as possible during the ascent, and halted on the last landing, facing the barricaded window before him and listening again to the ambient sonal landscape. There was nothing new, so he tapped quietly three times on the plywood in front of him.

There was nothing for almost a full minute, but then two muted taps echoed from inside. He tapped three times again, and then watched the minute vibrations at the barrier's edge as the latch inside was drawn. The plywood section pushed outward, and he moved aside to make way for it.

Audra smiled at him through the opening before stepping aside to let him enter. He didn't return it as he closed the plywood shutter behind him, and latched it, speaking to her over his shoulder.

"I wish you would stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"You know what."

"No, I don't."

"Stop acting like we haven't had this same conversation a dozen times. The singing. The sitting on the back porch. You know how dangerous it is."

He could hear her soft footfalls behind him as he walked down the short hall toward the rear of the apartment. He stepped into the small kitchen, and dropped his bag onto the table in the breakfast nook near the back door. Her reply was slow in coming.

"I'm sorry. But they seem to like it, you know?"

He schooled his irritation, knowing that she didn't respond well when he lost his temper. He unzipped his bag, and started to remove items from it as he chose his words.

"I'm sure they do." He held a can of soup up to his ear, pretending to listen. Then he shook his head.

"Nope, nothing. *Our* food is smarter than you, evidently."

She rolled her eyes, but gave a tiny snort of laughter.

"None of them were the angry ones. They just came to listen. They're gone already. Did you get more books?"

He turned back to his bag, face downcast so she wouldn't see his frown. Her ability to tell the disposition of the veg-heads was spooky, and despite his own preternatural ability, he found it a little un-nerving. Nevertheless, they'd been together long enough for him to know that if he stuck his head over the porch rail outside, he'd find the congregation below dispersed

to follow whatever hollow mandates still echoed in their rotting heads. He didn't pursue it.

"Yes. How can you possibly be done with the three I got yesterday? Don't you sleep?"

She shrugged.

"Two of them were ok. The last one was so bad, I just couldn't."

He pulled three paper-backs from the bag, and handed them to her.

"Well, here you go. Three more zombie apocalypse novels. I choke a little on the irony each time I pick one up for you."

She took them, and shrugged again.

"I like what I like."

"Did you actually read these before escapist fiction became real life?"

"No. It was vampires back then."

"You know, we could just move to the library. Book-junkie wonderland. Problem solved."

She looked through them, then took the one in the middle and handed it back.

"I've read this already. It's one of the first ones you brought. And I don't want to live at the library. I want to live here."

"So you've said."

It was a struggle to keep his voice even. It was getting harder and harder to operate within the confines she constantly set out for him, and her vague assurances did little to alleviate the growing pressure within him. Her track record was the only thing that kept him in check. That, and the fact that in a world that had mostly consumed itself, he and Audra still remained within a bubble of relative safety that he firmly believed she had constructed for them. That didn't mean he wouldn't still fish for clarification.

"The library is pretty nice. You should see it. It's defensible, it's in the triangle, and, well, you know. There're books there." It sounded lame, even to him.

She'd started shaking her head at the beginning of his sentence, and her expression clouded over.

"No. We're safe here, not there."

"Can you give me anything more than that?"

He knew that pushing her was a mistake, but it was one he seemed incapable of not making when he felt like this. He knew he'd really stepped in it when she started to mutter to herself, and to beat out that absent rhythm of her fist on her upper thigh. Her gaze, present until now, grew distracted and distant like the day he'd first met her. It had appeared that first time that she had been looking at him, but subsequent experience had showed him that she was looking *through* him, not at him. He was

tempted to try to short-circuit this, but knew from past episodes that it was useless. There was only getting to the end of it, and the clean-up afterward.

But this was nothing like anything before.

She grew agitated, her eyes darting back and forth, and he felt his alarm begin to swell as her words became distinct.

"...is always looking. He saw you. This is the only place. The triangle only works if we're here. He's the first link, and the chain is bad. The chain is bad. This is the only place. He saw you. The chain is bad.

You can't go outside the triangle. He saw you. He will start it, and we won't be able to stop it. The chain is bad. He thinks he knows what he wants, but he's wrong. He's...."

She tapered off, and her fist first slowed tempo, then stopped, fingers uncurling. She stood inert then, eyes blank, still as a painting.

"Audra?" His voice was a whisper. He knew better than to try to touch her.

She came back to herself, eyes focusing on him. Tears began to fall, and her voice hitched as she spoke.

"I don't know what it means. Please don't ask me."

He held out his hands, palms out.

"I won't. It's ok. You're ok."

"No it's *not*! Why am I like this? Why does this *happen* to me?"

"Audra. You're fine. There's a reason, but we don't need to know it to keep going. Let it go for now."

He didn't think she would calm down, and he was freaked out way more than normal. This was new, and he had no idea what to do with it. She'd had episodes at least twice a month for the last year and a half that they'd been together, but this was far beyond the few declaratory statements she would typically make that helped to establish the boundaries of their tiny world. His assurances were blind rote.

But she did. She drew a deep breath, and wiped her eyes with her hands. Then she looked at him directly, and delivered the knock-out punch.

"I remember something this time. We have to stay away from him."

"Him? Him who?"

"Lieutenant Dan."