



“Shit,” Antonia muttered.

The two stood still, listening closely. The revving was getting closer still and before long, the Vultures would be on top of them. Luke watched as Antonia surveyed the surrounding area. Her dark eyes flicked over the piles of wreck and ruin, broken glass and roaches and blood spatters left behind by God knows who or what.

*RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR*

Antonia grabbed Luke and the two huddled behind an overturned dumpster. Despite her irritation with him, Antonia pulled the little boy to her side and hushed him, letting him curl into her. The two sat in silence, waiting, and Luke’s wheezing settled to a whisper.

*RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR*

The bikes sped past their alleyway. The engines gave earsplitting roars. Mufflers coughed clouds of greenish smoke from the homemade gasoline they ran on. Luke pressed his face into Antonia’s chest and she held him there, ran her fingers through his mop of red hair. There were probably better ways to comfort a child than petting them like a dog, but for now, this was the best she could do.

Finally, the roaring ceased as their pursuers continued down the main thoroughfare. The two let out a breath in unison, feeling a bit of tension release as the sound of the bikes petered off into the distance. Antonia released Luke after a moment and glared down at him.

“What were you thinking?” she asked. Having bought them some time, she was now back to being irate.

“It was an accident,” Luke murmured. His voice dripped with guilt as he looked down at his hands. “I was pretending to drive. I didn’t know the car’s horn still worked.”

Antonia sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “Normally it wouldn’t, but older cars like the ones in the junkyard can be screwy. Most of them have been stripped already and you can’t know for sure what they’ll do. That’s why I told you to sit still—”

“And keep watch,” he finished for her, giving a sigh of his own. “I’m sorry, Toni.”

Worn out, she let the residual anger diffuse and patted his head lightly.

“It’s fine. The plugs in those cars weren’t worth much anyway,” she grunted as she got to her feet. She went to the alley’s entrance and peered out. “Those assholes are gonna be circling back before long. We need to figure a way home.”

Antonia looked up and down the street. She hadn’t been to this area in a few months. She strained to recall what this avenue had once looked like, but came up with nothing. Like the rest of the city, the area had been decimated when The Bomb dropped. Where skyscrapers once stood proud, there were skeletons of stone, of steel, the windows broken, frames crumbling. It was only slightly better than the center of town where, upon impact, the bomb had sent buildings tumbling into one another in a macabre game of dominoes, destroying anything and everything around them. Many people died that day, but it was not over yet. The Bomb had coated the city ruins in a thick yellow smog, lingering in every crack and crevice, staining the walls and streets with that sickly sunny color. Even now, you had to be careful not to spend too much time outside, lest the lingering dust should start caking in your lungs. And of course, Antonia reminded herself, a biker gang and diseased air was not the worst of their problems...

“Hey Toni, look!”

Luke's exclamation snapped her out of her thoughts, and she turned to see him tugging at a manhole cover. Or at least, he was trying to tug at it – the kid was too small to budge it even an inch.

"We could go through the sewer," he said, excited. After a pause, Antonia registered what he was saying and gawked at him.

"Hey," she said. "No. No way are we going down there."

"But..." Luke grunted as he tried in vain to move the heavy lid. "They'll know we normally take the subway tunnels and look for us there. We can travel this way! And it's better than hiding in the dumpster."

"Oh yeah?" she asked, crossing her arms. "Because I'd rather hide in a dumpster than get eaten."

Luke stopped tugging to blink up at her. He brushed his dirty red curls from his eyes as he said, "We don't know the zombies are down there."

Antonia's shoulders tensed. She always tried to use alternate terms when talking about the corpses that, not long after the radiation had set in, had begun rising, walking, and eating everything in sight. She tried – but Luke, she was learning, was not the kind of kid you could bundle up with censorship.

Instead, you had to be honest.

"Hell no," she said, putting her foot down. "There is no way we're going down there. Those things—"

"Zombies!"



“Oh God,” Luke whimpered as the bikes went by. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he’d been spotted. A second later Antonia called for him, and he slid over to the manhole and dropped his now jelly legs inside. Antonia pulled him down into the darkness before reaching up to haul the cover back into place.

Once they were both on the ground, Antonia let out a huff of exhaustion. They were going to need a few days of rest after all of this, she thought. Then, she glanced down to see Luke was shaking. She reached into her ragged backpack and pulled out one of their flashlights to get a better look at him.

The kid was as scrawny as the day she’d met him and just as pale. His mop of red hair hung in his eyes, long bangs reaching down to rest on freckled cheeks. She crouched a little and saw that his brown eyes were unfocused, and his lower lip trembled with the rest of him.

“What?” she asked, reaching out as if to touch him, but stopping before doing so. “What is it?”

Luke sniffed and said weakly, “I think he saw me...”

Antonia arched an eyebrow. “Who? Wait...Rust?”

Luke whimpered and gave a nod, caving in his chest and hunching his shoulders. “He’s gonna kill us,” he coughed, on the edge of crying for real. “We’re gonna die.”

“Hey.”

She reached forward and this time grasped his shoulder, shaking him slightly in order to make him look her in the eye. She leveled his gaze and said, “We’re not going to die. Not by Rust and the Vultures anyway; for now, let’s just get home, okay?”

Luke gave a gasping hiccough but managed to nod. Antonia nodded in return. She took out a second flashlight and handed it to Luke.

“Here,” she said, brushing his bangs from his eyes. “You’re the navigator, remember? Think you can get us out of here?”

Luke wiped his eyes and then his nose before nodding again. “I remember the sewer lines being marked on that subway map you gave me. I think I still remember where they all go.”

“Good,” said Antonia, once again grateful for the kid’s photographic memory. “Rust and his boys probably won’t follow us down here, but we should probably still get going.” She pointed her flashlight ahead and started to lead the way and was only a bit surprised when she felt warm little fingers wrap around her own.

They made their way down the tunnels, Antonia silently grateful that so far they seemed to be shallow. There wasn’t much in the way of life, besides rats and roaches of course, but neither of them were bothered by those. After doing things like running for your life from a biker gang, or watching a corpse chase and attack people, household pests tend to seem insignificant. Still, Antonia kept a careful eye on their surroundings, stopping every now and then and leaning an ear towards the stone ceiling a few feet above. But each time, she was met with only echoes, the gurgling sound of water, a chorus of squeaky rats, and Luke’s breathing.

After a while, they reached an intersection where Luke said they were, unfortunately, going to have to cross. Even more unfortunate was that the tunnel up ahead didn’t have a wide enough platform for them to walk on, meaning they would have to slog through the greywater.

Antonia dropped into the filthy water and let out a groan of disgust, grateful it only reached her calves. Then she looked where Luke was standing – all three feet of him – and knew he wouldn't be able to keep up in this muck.

With a small sigh, she reached and picked him up, hefting him onto her hip as if he was a toddler.

“You're lucky I did weight training in high school,” she grunted, as they continued in the dark.

“At least I'm skinny,” he offered. “My Nanna used to say I was light as a bird.”

“Sure,” she said. “If that bird was an ostrich.”

Luke giggled at that. Then he started outright laughing at the image of Antonia hauling an ostrich around on her hip. Antonia shook her head and smiled a little, glad that at least things had calmed down for now. Once he stopped giggling, Luke wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder.

“Sleepy, ginger?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” he said with a yawn. They were both quiet for a moment, surrounded by the echoes of rushing, putrid water running off in the distance

“I'm sorry I messed up at the scrapyards, Toni,” Luke said after a minute. “I really am. And I'm gonna try to do better from now on. Promise.”

Earlier, she had been so angry she had blown up at the kid who had ruined what was supposed to be a fantastic haul. Now, standing in the bowels of the decimated city, holding the



same kid tight to her chest, Antonia let out a long, slow breath. “Forget about it,” she told Luke, as the two continued onward. “We can still see if Hank’ll trade us anything for what we got.”

“Okay.”

The two lapsed back into silence. Before long, they reached another intersection, and Antonia was able to step back onto the pathway. Just as she did, though, she paused, brow furrowed. She thought she heard something...

“Toni, what—?”

“Quiet,” she said softly.

Holding Luke tight, she turned in a slow circle, pointing her flashlight up and down the tunnels. The sound of runoff roared in her ears as she strained to pick up that noise. It had sounded like...

“Footsteps,” she murmured. She heard them clearly now: dozens of feet shuffling in the darkness, low groans bouncing off the walls with such frequency that it was impossible to tell just where they came from. Beneath it all, she heard Luke’s heartbeat, hammering faster than a cornered mouse.

Antonia gave up trying to figure out which direction the dead-walkers (as she preferred to call them) were coming from. Instead, she readjusted Luke in her arms and marched ahead, gaze straight, determined. Forget trying to take the sewers all the way back to their little hideout uptown. The second she found a ladder leading up to a manhole and the surface, she was taking it.

Then the sounds grew louder, and she stopped in her tracks. She raised the flashlight again to see a group of at least six corpses shambling up ahead. The things screeched when the light hit them and shook their clenched fists. Antonia stared, her mind going blank.

“Toni?” Luke whimpered.

She gulped and started walking backwards, slowly, keeping the light trained on the corpses. She tried to plan, to think of what she had on her that she could use to fight them off, because the light could only hold them back for so long. Soon hunger would overpower their irritation.

No sooner than Antonia thought that, it proved true, as the corpses started stumbling toward her, eyes wide, mouths gaping. Their skin was taut and waxy, every bone showing through their translucent skin. Antonia silently wished that they looked like classic movie zombies, the green, shambling piles of rot. Anything had to be better than creatures that looked very close to human but were most definitely not.

Then the corpse closest to them let out a sudden, croaking growl. The other corpses joined in the howl, Luke screamed, and Antonia turned and ran down the tunnel to their right.

She ran, holding Luke tight, doing her best not to trip as she slogged through the knee-high water. Luke clung to her, pointing his own flashlight behind and watching as the zombies slowly but steadily followed them, their screams echoing off the walls.

“They’re coming!” he yelled to Toni.

“I know!” she yelled back, on the verge of panicking.

Then she saw the ladder she had been looking for. It wasn't the exit they had planned on taking, but who cared anymore?

"Okay," Antonia panted once they reached the ladder. "Okay, okay, we're okay... hang on to me, ginger. I need my hands free for this."

Luke did as she asked, wrapping his legs around her and holding on in an awkward sort of sideways piggyback. Antonia struggled up the ladder, fighting against the weight of both Luke and her pack. She reached the top just as the corpses neared them, and she reached to press against the manhole cover. It did not move at first, and she felt her heart skip a beat as the corpses' screams rung in her ears. Gasping, desperate, she pushed again, and the cover finally started moving.

Just then, one of the corpses reached up and grabbed Luke by the ankle, causing the boy to let out a scream of fright.

"NO!" Luke screamed, shaking his leg free and trying to kick at the thing, only for it to grab back on and yank at him. "NO, LET GO! TONI!"

"HANG ON!" She shoved again and this time was able to lift the cover and slide it to the side. "OKAY, NOW JUST—!"

She was cut off when Luke screamed again, just as he lost his grip and tumbled down into the waiting arms of the dead-walkers.

He screamed as the creatures pulled his limbs taught, playing tug-o-war over who would get the first bite.

He screamed louder still as one of them wrenched his head to the side to try to gnaw on his face and went pale as he looked into a pair of eyes that were brimming with the most desperate sort of hunger.

Then the thing's eyes snapped shut, its head jerked, and it howled with pain. Luke looked to see Antonia standing behind the zombie, brandishing a rusty tire iron like a weapon. Luke watched as she started wailing on the others, managing to stun them long enough to yank him out of their grasps. He watched as she pushed him against the wall and stood in front of him, stance wide, beating every zombie that tried to come at them.

Luke didn't know the words to express what he felt as Antonia acted as a wall between him and the monsters, bashing in their heads, facing their greatest threat head on, all for his sake. All he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and hug the back of Toni's leg, doing his best to keep from crying.

A while later Luke climbed up and out of the manhole, followed closely by Antonia. She was exhausted, covered in putrid, musty blood, greywater, and whatever else. The young woman let out a sigh as she dropped her pack to the ground and shoved the cover back over the hole. Luke stood by, watching her with wide eyes.

"You okay?" she asked when she noticed him staring.

Luke nodded. "That was awesome," he whispered, voice overflowing with admiration.

Antonia blinked. Then she grinned and let out a chuckle, reaching to tousle his red curls.

"Come on, kid," she said, shouldering her pack once more. "You need to find us a way home."

“Okay,” Luke agreed. He walked beside her and reached up to squeeze her hand.

Antonia squeezed back.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time they got back to the attic of the boarded up house they called home, both of them were completely exhausted, and for once Antonia had no complaints about eating a dinner of Spaghetti-O’s straight from the can.

“Toni?” Luke asked once they had washed up as best they could, and he’d snuggled down into his sleeping bag.

“Yeah?” she asked him with a yawn, limbs splayed out spread eagle on her thin mattress.

“Thank you.”

She rolled over to look at him. “What for?”

“For being my friend.”

Antonia was quiet for a minute before she reached over and grasped his little hand in hers.

“Good night, kid.”