

*“They won’t attack you head on,” his father’s voice echoed in his mind. “Creepers don’t strike a man when they can see his face. Creepers will only come at you when your back is turned. The obvious solution being, to never turn your back on them. That’s why we have the masks.”*

Victor remembered his father’s words well. The monstrous beasts now infested the residential and shopping area. But Creepers weren’t the only things to fear in ‘Derelict Plaza’. There were also feral dogs, contaminated water, pockets of poison gas and any number of potential threats in the city. The buildings were constantly on the verge of collapse and the very air tasted like gasoline. When survivors he met around the army base talked about the incident, Victor saw the milky gray color of their eyes and knew their cracking voices came from barely usable vocal cords.

None of these, in Victor’s opinion, were as bad as the Creepers. He’d never seen one, but the stories were enough to make his gut twist. They were human once but had developed nasty tempers and violent tendencies. Humans were not supposed to be locked up in boxes like they had been, but it became necessary after unmarked planes dropped poison bombs on the city. In their homes, they lost who they were and turned into something violent and dangerous.

At first, people could survive indoors for a time. It was believed that the cloud would dissipate quickly and people would be allowed to rebuild the city. Days became months and morale disappeared a year after the attack. Boredom turned to cabin fever, which eventually gave way to true madness and then turned into something else entirely. Some people told Victor that it was human nature; others said the gas only changed certain people, driving them to something inhuman based on their genes. A new savagery emerged among a percentage of the population.

Only those with the patience to wait for rescue crews from the government survived the rage that followed.

The thought of them terrified Victor. He wanted nothing to do with what used to be his home. Until a message had come tied to a pigeon, which shocked many people. *We are here*, it read, followed by an address in neat, cursive letters. *Help us*.

“I have to go in,” Victor explained to his father. “If there are people alive in there, I can imagine no worse hell.”

“I agree,” his father said, “but you’re going to have to find a guide. I don’t want you going in there alone.”

“I can do this. I know the city—“

“You knew Boston. You don’t know Derelict Plaza. Get a guide.”

Sadly, no one had been willing to lead him into the city after seeing the address. Victor asked everyone, but the nature guides, rescue teams, and grizzled soldiers usually just laughed in his face. “Too deep,” one grizzled soldier had spat at him. “You won’t find much left of these people. You’d be lucky to get out alive.”

Ultimately, Victor decided to go alone. He bought a knife, a map, and the mask to trick the creepers. His father had accepted the lie that he had gotten a guide and even given him a bottle of water for the journey. Victor took his father’s warmest coat and headed into the city early in the morning when the Creepers were less active.

The city was still. The home Victor had once known was nothing like he remembered. The city streets that had once been filled with people and shuffling cars were now empty and lifeless. The air still had the acrid smell and burned Victor’s eyes when he faced downwind for too long. When he’d asked about it, most experts said the gas was inert. Despite this, the long-

term effects like cloudy eyes and burned vocal cords were still a threat. Victor decided the best course of action was to find these people soon and get out before the gas could affect him.

Walking through a creaking, iron gate Victor paused and looked up at the four-story apartment complex. There was a light frost dusting the metal. Dark stone covered the center courtyard, leaving creases in the stonework for deposits of frost on the ground. The fountain in the courtyard had been shattered, leaving bits of stone sticking out of the dirty ice. The frost crunched under Victor's boots and he could see his breath. The building that the address had led him to was all dark concrete, punctuated by shattered windows. Some of the windows had long sheets hanging from them, an attempt to show signs of life.

Victor looked around the courtyard, nervous. So far, the trip had been successful. He'd encountered a pack of feral dogs, but they were skittish and ran from him. He didn't feel the lightheadedness that indicated the gas was harming him. That left only one threat in his mind: Creepers. He wasn't sure what they looked like but figured something as violent as a Creeper would be easily identified.

They were here. They had to be here. There were birds, live birds. In his limited experience, that was a good sign. Living things meant fresh water and the air couldn't have been too tainted here.

"Hello?" Victor asked, calling into a vacant door. "Is someone here?"

"Show us your hands!" A woman's voice shouted.

"What?" Victor asked, trying to find the source of the voice. The mask slipped off his forehead, but Victor managed to stop it from hitting the ground.

“Show us your hands!” The voice repeated. The woman’s words echoed around the courtyard, indistinct as it bounced off the stone and concrete. “All ten fingers! Spread ‘em! Do it or I’ll blow your brains out!”

“Abby,” a male voice began, equally distorted. “He’s not one of them.”

“How do you know?” The woman’s voice shouted, offended. “This is how they got David! And Lily! They’re tricky!”

“Abby, that’s enough!” The male voice barked. The figure stepped out, holding a length of pipe in his hands, with a large nail crudely forced through one end. Despite his calm voice, he held the pipe to his shoulder, ready to swing the weapon like a bat. “Come on,” the man said. “Show us your hands, both of them.”

Victor held up his hands, his mask clattering to the ground behind him. He spread his fingers, displaying the digits. The man slowly stepped forward, holding his pipe ready to swing. He looked over Victor’s face, staring into his eyes and looking for something that Victor didn’t understand. The man’s attention went to Victor’s hands.

“Alright, Abby, stand down, he’s unarmed. Sorry for the panic. The name’s Hector.”

“I got your message,” Victor said, digging into his pockets for the note. “Hell of a welcome you guys have here.”

“Precaution is the daughter of necessity. Abby and I have been tricked before. Fool me once, right?”

“Fair enough,” Victor picked up his mask from the ground. “You guys need some help?”

“We need to get out of the city,” Abby said, stepping forward. She had long, blonde hair, twisted into knots and hanging limply around her face. One eye was bright blue, but the poison

had turned the other was pale and milky white. She was holding a rifle in her hands, her grip tight on the weapon.

“Why not just go?” Victor asked.

“There were twenty of us when we started,” Hector explained, sadly. “Every direction we’ve gone has been crawling with those wild men. We were expecting more than one guy to come and help us out.”

“My father and I tried to enlist other people, but a lot of soldiers died in the initial fighting. No one I talked to was willing to come out here.”

“Don’t blame, em,” Hector said. “Abby and I have been stuck out here for a couple years. How soon until you can get us out of here?”

“I can leave now if you want—”

“Bad idea,” Abby said. “You’ll be dead if we don’t make it out of the city by nightfall. Stay here tonight. We can leave in the morning.”

Victor nodded and followed the others inside. The remains of the apartment lobby had been reshaped for the purpose of a single living space. Two mattresses were stacked in the far corner and the mailboxes had been repurposed to hold clothing, cans of food and a few precious bottles of water. One thing that stuck out to Victor was the calendar, left open to the wrong date.

“Nice mask,” Hector said. “What’s it for?”

“Creepers—the wild men—won’t strike if they see a face. So we take the masks and tie them to the backs of our heads, so we have a face on the front and the back. They assume you see them and won’t attack.”

“I don’t think that’s really true...” Hector said. “These Creepers? They’re much smarter than you seem to think.”

“Really?” Victor asked. “We’ve been using that trick for years. The Creepers are pretty stupid, even if they are violent. I mean, I made it all the way through the city and managed to avoid them.”

“Yeah, you did,” Abby said, putting her weapon down. “We wanted you here.”

The pipe to his knee caught Victor off guard, the bone snapping in two and sending him to the ground. Before Victor could pull out his knife, Hector’s teeth were deep in his wrist, pulling him down to the ground and attacking his arm. Abby leaped onto his chest and clawed at his face, tearing the flesh away with her fingernails. He tried to resist, but Abby’s narrow knife plunged between his ribs. Victor couldn’t scream before the air left his body.

The pair tore at what remained of Victor with their sharp fingernails. Hector ripped off a piece of Victor’s forearm and chewed, gnashing the meat with sharpened teeth. Swallowing a piece of flesh, Hector licked his lips with a frown. “Thin,” he grumbled. “Why do all people have to be thin these days?”

“Don’t complain, darling,” Abby answered, kissing his cheek with her bloody lips. “He is rather tender. Thin; but it’s all lean muscle.”

“Not tainted,” Hector said, picking his teeth with a fingernail. “No fear or poison to spoil the flavor.”

“They always trust a pretty face,” Abby laughed, picking up Victor’s plastic mask. “My mask is more convincing. Calls us stupid...I’d be insulted if they knew any better! They always believe the scared little girl routine. Puts them at ease before...” Abby crunched down on one of Victor’s lifeless fingers, pausing only to spit out a bit of bone.

“Mhmm,” Hector purred, licking his fingertips. “Perhaps, we’ll have to send another pigeon tomorrow.”

“Why not two?” Abby smiled, leaning towards Hector with a grin.

“Don’t get greedy,” Hector chuckled. “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice—”

“Dinner for two!” Abby jumped over Victor’s body, playfully tackling Hector with a giggle.