

They were closing in behind us. We had to run faster. If they caught us, they were going to rip us to pieces.

Literally.

Our weapons were some pipes, a crowbar, and a couple pocketknives. None of the gutter-rats had any guns. Not that they would have helped us very much.

But it was almost dawn. We had time. We could still make it.

“Up there!” Isaac shouted from beside me, pointing at the fire escape on the left of the alley.

I made a hard turn that nearly sent me skidding, but I kept my balance and vaulted onto the top of the dumpster. I jumped for the metal grate over my head, palms and fingers biting into the icy metal. I gritted my teeth and pulled myself up, latching onto the railing and dragging my body over the ledge. I turned around and checked on the rest of my group.

Reyes was coming next. Isaac was standing on the dumpster lid. He wasn't going to move until his best friend was safe. Reyes was just starting his climb when they came around the corner. I gripped the railing tightly, breath catching in my throat.

There were three of them. Their clothes were tattered strips on their sickly pale bodies. Two red bruises circled their blazing red eyes. Ice pick claws poked out of their bony fingertips. Even from up on the landing, I could see their inch long canine teeth. Screeching like tortured wild cats, they lunged for the dumpster.

I grabbed Reyes' arms, trying to pull him up. I wasn't the muscle of the group, but I had to help Reyes, and Isaac was so far back—

*Crack!*

I jumped at the sound of metal striking bone, my head snapping up. Isaac had his back to us, swinging his crowbar at the heads of the infected swarming him. He lashed out with his feet and swung the piece of metal in his hands, keeping them away. But they were faster than he was. Stronger. So much more dangerous.

“Isaac!” I screamed. “Baby, come on!”

He swept the crowbar up, cracking it against the chin of an infected. Bone splintered and blood spewed out of its mouth as its head rocked back. Isaac turned and bolted toward us.

Just as one of them pounced onto the dumpster and jumped onto his back.

The force drove Isaac onto his stomach with a loud bang. The crowbar slid from his fingers.

The monster pulled its head back, extended its fangs, and sank them into Isaac's neck. Time slowed. I felt my heart stutter to a stop in my chest. My throat turned to sandpaper from the screams I didn't realize I was letting go.

It pulled on his skin, trying to rip it from his throat and eat him whole. Blood was pouring into the grooves of the dumpster lid. Isaac's screams of pain cut through the air like a knife.

I knew what this meant. What would follow. But it was *Isaac*. I couldn't let him die.

"Sophia! Don't!" Reyes shouted.

I didn't listen. I grabbed the pipe tucked into my backpack.

He tried to grab my arm, but I was already leaping over the railing of the fire escape. I landed hard, dropping into a crouch to absorb the shock that went up my legs. I took off and swung the pipe into the head of the monster eating Isaac alive.

My arm vibrated as the pipe connected with its skull, crushing the bone inward and knocking it off Isaac. I hammered the pipe down onto the top of its head, hearing another sickening *crack*. The monster fell off the dumpster lid. I rushed toward Isaac when an icy grip hooked my ankle and pulled me off the dumpster. I landed hard on my back, skull smacking against the pavement.

I thought I heard Reyes call my name, but it was hard to tell from the pounding in my head. The world was blurred above me, the ground hard under me. Everything became crystal clear when I heard the snarl and saw the infected monster jump on me.

I brought the pipe up just in time, placing it under its throat. It snapped and hissed, spittle raining on my face. My arms trembled as I tried to hold it off. I brought my knees up and pushed, desperate to get it away. Sharp claws scraped along my side, dragging down me like nails. I cried out, my arms buckling. I twisted my head away, hearing jaws clamp open and shut just above my ear. I smelled the stale blood on its breath, and nearly gagged.

There was a sharp *crack* that caused the infected creature to stiffen and roll off my body. I turned my head forward and opened my eyes. Reyes was above me, the hooked edge of Isaac's crowbar embedded deep in the infected's skull. Fighting vertigo, I got to my feet and looked at Reyes. He was breathing heavily. His hazel eyes were sad. I knew what he was thinking, but I refused to accept it.

A vehicle rumbled down the street. Tires screeched as it pulled to a stop. I twisted around and looked at Reyes.

"Hide him!" I whispered harshly.

His eyes widened. "Are you insane?!"

"Hide him, Reyes!"

My friend shook his head, but worked on lifting up a lid of the dumpster. He pulled it open and slid inside, dragging Isaac with him. I faced the mouth of the alley, relieved when I heard the dumpster lid slam shut.

The two Apostles marched in, guns raised and pointed at me. I held up my hands, wincing as the open wounds were pulled against my ribs. The flashlights on their rifles blinded me as they walked forward.

"I'm not infected!" I cried. "I'm not one of them! Please!"

One of them turned and shot one of the corpses on the ground. I jumped at the harsh bang, taking a step back.

“Drop the pipe,” the other man commanded.

I let it slip from my fingers and clatter onto the ground. I took another step back, but he grabbed my wrist and slammed me against the side of the dumpster. I pressed my palms to it, wishing my heart would slow down. More gunfire cracked as the other infected were confirmed dead. The man’s partner used his radio to call for a retrieval crew in the area.

The Apostle started running his hands over my body, pulling my hair away from my neck and looking for bite marks.

“I wasn’t bitten,” I said quietly.

“Stay still and shut up, rat,” he shot back gruffly.

I squeezed my eyes shut and remained as motionless as possible. It was very hard to do when his hands roamed over my chest, down my stomach, and over the rest of my curves. If I’d had the pipe, I would have smacked him in the head with it, but that defiance would end with me being shot. It was uncomfortable, but at least it wasn’t sexual.

He poked and prodded the claw marks on my ribs. I bit my lip and forced myself not to make a sound. He lifted up my shirt to get a better look at them. His partner marched up to me, looking at the scratches.

“She clean?” he asked.

The first Apostle jabbed my throbbing wounds again. The pinching pain had me grimacing.

“Looks like she got scratched. No bites.”

The man’s hand clamped on my shoulder. He whirled me around and slammed my back against the side of the dumpster.

“Who else is with you?” he demanded.

“No one,” I replied in a quiet voice.

He grabbed my shoulders and slammed me against the cold metal again.

“Who else is with you?” he shouted this time.

“No one!” I screamed back.

His cold blue eyes stared at me from under his tactical helmet. All the street Apostles dressed like the old S.W.A.T. teams used to. Only these men were much more ruthless.

The radio on the chest of the second Apostle crackled to life, saying something about a nest and backup being required. The man muttered a reply.

“Come on,” he said. “Beta’s getting swarmed. They need help.”

The Apostle looked from his partner to me. He shoved away from me, and suddenly I could breathe again. I gasped in air, wrapping my arms around my middle. He looked at me coldly for another long minute before his partner urged him away.

While they exited the alley, I grabbed the lead pipe. I grimaced with every small motion as I placed it between the straps of my backpack. I lifted my shirt and looked at the scratches. They would be sore for the next few days, but they would heal on their own after I cleaned them. I didn’t need stitches and wasn’t going to bleed out. As soon as I watched the Apostle’s SUV drive away, I climbed up the dumpster and threw open the lid.

That was when Isaac screamed.

He started thrashing and jerking around, his best friend needing to pin him down by his shoulders. Reyes looked up at me. He felt as tormented as I did. I looked at my boyfriend.

The skin on his neck was still smeared with blood, but the wound had healed over. My stomach clenched.

Isaac was infected.

Reyes came to the same conclusion. “Sophia...”

“No,” I said, knowing where his thought process was going. “No. We’re not doing that.”

“We don’t have a choice. You’ve seen what happens.”

“We are not killing him,” I barked.

“Oh, that’s romantic and all, but how the hell are we supposed to keep him from killing us first?”

I crouched down, reaching for them both. “We’ll worry about that later. Right now we need to get out of Apostle territory.”

We waited about a minute for Isaac to calm down. His entire body slumped, like all the energy and strength had been vacuumed out of him. Reyes sighed and slung Isaac’s arm over his shoulder to hoist him up. My ribs strained agonizingly when I reached forward and helped lift Isaac out of the dumpster. I sat him upright so Reyes could hop out. He was shivering.

“You’re hurt,” he whispered.

“So are you,” I told him, brushing the dark hair off his eyebrows.

Isaac closed his eyes. “Phia, what are you doing? You know how this ends.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to keep him warm and kissed his chilly forehead. “We’ll find a place to rest. Then we’ll talk.”

I had no idea what I was doing. But I did know that I wasn't going to let Isaac die. Or watch him turn into the monster we feared most.