

Concrete Jungle

Angelo Serrano tried very hard not to move as he peered through the overgrowth that covered the railing of the old watch post overlooking the city stretching in every direction below with his binoculars.

Sometimes he wondered if he was trapped in a nightmare. Then he remembered that the world had gone mad. But still, he wondered how even in a mad world he got to this place here, sneaking above the city that was crawling with what could only be described as monsters.

In the world before, he was a nobody, just a garbage man that liked to play little games with himself while he worked. He would look at trash bags, and based on their shape and weight, sometimes smell, he would try to guess what was inside. His coworkers would play with him, sometimes even make bets, though not often as he would usually win. He spent his days mostly looking through trash for anything valuable, searching for things that others threw away that he could still use.

There was a reason why the saying "*One man's trash is another's treasure*" was still heard often. It was true.

Every now and then he would find something interesting, a tv that still worked, a old and weathered bed frame. Sometimes, even valuables that had clearly been thrown out by mistake, jewelry, even once a wallet filled with cash—though, Angelo had returned that. But he had spent his days looking for new things among the trash of millions.

Some looked down on him for his profession, and his scavenging ways, but he didn't mind their words and looks. A person had to survive somehow, and he had never had any one of them offer him a helping hand.

Then the Light came, and the nightmare began, for most people at least. Angelo remembered the chaos of the start, the deaths, the struggle. Yet, in the deepest parts of his heart, he couldn't help but be thankful. Because as the world changed, for the first time in his life, he had been offered a helping hand.

A text had blazed inside of his mind, offering a gift. As the Light burned the world away, he had been given something that made all his struggle before somehow worth it.

The Light came and he was transformed into a **Seeker**. He didn't quite understand what that had meant at first. He had of course heard whispers from others, mostly the younger generations, talking about Classes, Levels, Skills, and Experience, but he didn't really understand. He had never played games, his family was barely making ends meet when he was a kid. He played on an old Gameboy when a few times, borrowed from a kid in the neighborhood, hell, he didn't even own a good phone. He made do with an older model.

But he didn't need to understand what they were talking about to grasp the changes.

He had done as he always had, he sought anything of value everywhere he looked. Only now it was far more important, because what was valuable had changed, and finding something of value was essential for survival.

And his Mask, or Class as most people called them, had given him the tools to do just that. In just a month, he had managed to get more Carvings, or levels, than most people.

At first, he was part of the scavenging group sent out to search for food, or anything else of interest. He always had a knack for finding hidden things, and he was quickly rewarded with a skill, [Detect Value]. It had completely changed everything for him. He had caught the eye of the big guys in charge of their group, and with that came more work. He didn't mind it at first. What he did was important, people knew his name, they smiled at him when they saw him walk by. He was given a better room, better clothes, even women had started to talk to him more.

But then came the dungeons, where his talent became even more invaluable. Knowing when a dangerous dungeon was worth the risk was a matter of life and death. It also let him see hidden treasures.

He had leveled fast as they cleared them, sometimes losing new friends, other times celebrating their success. He reached level, or the 7th Carving, and became one of only seven people among the barely a thousand survivors who had reached that high, and only the second who had gained a second skill—[Detect Danger]. The skill that made him even more important than before. He was an asset now, and helping the scouts had become a priority.

The world had gone mad. The survivors of a literal apocalypse were relying on the talents of a garbage man. Sometimes Angelo found humor in that thought.

His skills worked in very specific ways. For [Detect Value] had to have a certain state of mind, he had to think on what he thought was valuable, which was a fluid concept, and he had to hold it firm inside of his mind. If he thought the food was valuable, he had to hold the concept of it in his mind. And he had to be very specific with it. It was too broad otherwise. Once it had just illuminated the entire forest around him in his sight, because, obviously something considered the plants all around them "food". If they were looking for animals to hunt, he had to keep the image of what they were looking for in his mind. And it was hard to keep up, it

drained him quickly. More when he had just gotten the skill than now, he had gotten better at it.

[Detect Danger] was very different. It turned his vision into a world filled with gradients. It showed him areas that were more dangerous than others. Though it was hard to discern what that danger meant, in most cases at least. It didn't seem to take the concepts he held in his mind into account. For example, if he used it on the base, it turned the entire world around him into a light shade of red, indicating moderate danger. Which was obvious, the base was filled with survivors, strong people, they had weapons all around the place, guards, and so on. There was little crime, surprisingly, the big guys had stomped on that pretty hard at the start. But that meant that he couldn't really detect what kind of a danger was there, only that an area was in fact dangerous in some manner. Sometimes, that only meant that there was a poisonous plant around, but, again, the big guys had seen the value in it.

Angelo's skill told them something, and after the first time someone ate a fruit that had been perfectly safe in the previous world, but had now turned to be poisonous, Angelo was being called to use his skill more often. They had developed a system for the colors that he saw, that indicated the level of danger and they had tested things out. Sometimes, just because something was dangerous, didn't mean that it wasn't useable at all.

Which brought him here, to the worst place on Earth imaginable, as far as he was concerned. He wished that he could turn around and run away as far as he could. But he was needed. He was one of the only people who knew Medellin as well as the back of their hand, he had spent years working on the city streets, and besides. His skills were essential.

"What do you see Angelo?" Gabriela whispered to him from just next to him.

They were both on the ground in the middle of the lookout in their ghillie suits, just above the city. Too close for Angelo's comfort.

"Nothing good," Angelo responded, looking through the binoculars and focusing on his skill. He couldn't use it for long, it drained him too much.

They were just above the San Antonio neighborhood, in the Villa Hermos district on the Eastern side of the city. It was midday, and the sun was shining above them. The sounds that came from the city were enough to bring nightmares all on their own, but it was worse at night, Angelo knew. They had sent scouts at night before, and few had managed to return alive. Gabriela being one of the lucky few. She was one of the best scouts in the group, had a Class for it. He didn't know what she did before to earn it, she rarely talked about her past, but she was very good.

That at least made Angelo feel like he wasn't sent on a suicide mission, the big guys wouldn't risk Gabriela like that. And even though he was terrified out of his mind, he knew that this was necessary. They had to know.

"Doce de Octubre and Castilla are bright red," Angelo said as he studied the city through the binoculars and the lens of his skill. The two districts stood out to his sight.

He heard Gabriela's pen move over the paper in her hands, making notes on the crude map she had drawn.

"Robledo and Aranjuez are a shade lighter," he whispered. "The rest... it is all mixing too much, but it is all various shades of mid red," Angelo said, then quickly turned his skill off. He already felt out of breath. The levels of danger in the city were higher than anything he had seen in the forest. It was ironic, and also very sad, in a way.

He looked at the big buildings, at the roads, the valley, a stretch of land covered by the human hand. A carved piece of nature that they had mastered, turned into their home. And now, just a month after the arrival of the Light, nature had retaken the city. It didn't seem possible, but he saw more green than concrete and brick now. Vines crawled up the buildings, grass covered the streets, trees grew taller than they ever should be. The Light had changed many things, and he had seen first hand how it had caused some things mutate, to grow in spurts that seemed insane. He had personally seen a farm plot on the base grow fully developed plants overnight.

And it wasn't just that, the animals were affected too. The city below him was the proof of that. The city of millions of people was no longer ruled by humans. He wondered how many managed to escape it, he had been lucky. He lived on the outskirts, in the poorer area, he had managed to get out easily enough. The rest... He heard stories from some of the survivors who had taken a day or two to get out of the city. They were... Harrowing tales.

Now, the city was ruled by roving packs of dogs, some of which had mutated, had grown to be the size of horses. Not all animals were affected, but for some reason a certain percentage of them had changed, and not all in the same way. The changes seemed unique, as unique as the Classes that humans got. Perhaps the animals got something similar, Angelo didn't know, but he then again, he wasn't part of the group that thought about such things.

One never really realized just how many animals lived in a city just alongside humans. Pets, strays, and just wild animals that were part of the city ecosystem. And whatever had made some animals and plants mutate, also made some have other kind of spurts. Some of the base dogs had their gestation periods lowered significantly, with their offspring growing unnaturally fast, and turning out... Different. Angelo knew of at least two dogs that were barely a year old and had grown to the size of a pony. The big guys kept them separate, testing to see what exactly had happened and

if they were dangerous. He had heard a rumor that one of the dogs had scales instead of fur.

The animals had gone into the frenzy in the days following the Light, but most had calmed down in the weeks after. Some dogs and cats had found the base weeks ago, and were now part of the survivors along with everybody else. Angelo for one was glad for it, the amount of times a dog had alerted them at danger coming was worth risking of them going into a frenzy again. Though there were no signs of it, not that they knew what to look for or what had caused it in the first place.

But the city was a different story. It had turned wild, was far more dangerous than the forest and the mountains where the wild animal population was much smaller. Dog packs were bad enough, but then there were birds that seemingly fought with other animals for territory, and that could mimic human speech so perfectly that they had lured more than one scouting group into danger. Back when they sent people into the city, before they learned how treacherous it truly was. When they had hoped to find survivors and learned that nothing human still lived in the city.

The day was dangerous enough, but the real nightmare came out at night. Rats, what seemed like millions of them, some as big as dogs, swarming over everything. They've had issues with some lost hordes of them leaving the city and attacking the base, barely a few hundred of them, but they lost people.

The rats, were in Angelo's opinion, the worst of the lot. The rats ruled Medellin.

A moment later, Gabriela spoke after she finished noting what he had relayed.

"Okay. Whenever you are ready," she said.

Angelo grimaced, then closed his eyes for a second, focusing on the image of what he considered the most valuable at the moment. They had come here for information, something far more important than what their teams had looked for before. Once, they had come for food, for supplies, weapons. The price they paid trying to get all that stuff wasn't worth it, but it had helped them survive. Now... Now they knew of a greater danger, and they had to know.

He fixed the thought of dungeons inside his head, he wanted to detect them, to see their value. He opened his eyes and his vision was filled with bonfires blazing in his sight. He scanned the city with his binoculars as he felt the energy leave his body from the strain of the skill.

"Shit," Angelo said.

"What is it? How many do you see?" Gabriela asked.

"Hundreds, there are hundreds," Angelo whispered, almost not able to believe what his eyes were seeing. "And there are many that shine bright," he added.

"How bright?"

"Too bright," Angelo said.

"Shit," she responded.

"Most are up north," Angelo started. "Doce de Octubre and Castilla."

It made sense why those were the most dangerous areas then. Dungeons could break, spilling in alien monsters into the world. They had seen them break before, had to fight monsters. That's why they looked for them, why they tried to complete them quickly, before they could spill open. They knew that the longer a dungeon stayed without being completed, the more

powerful it became. They didn't know yet what made them break open, some weak dungeons broke earlier, while some much stronger didn't seem to show any sign of getting close to breaking. There seemed to be different limits for different dungeons, and they were still figuring out how to classify them properly.

But this... Hundreds of dungeons in the city was beyond insane. They barely found a few dozen out in the wild around the base.

And this was only what he could see from his vantage point. He couldn't see the ones in the buildings, below the ground... They were screwed. If all those dungeons broke open, if monsters spilled out and crashed with the animals in the city... That fighting would drive danger out of the city, and straight to the base. This was what the big guys had been worried about, what Angelo and Gabriela were sent here to confirm.

"We need to head back," Gabriela interjected, pulling him out of his thoughts. "We can't get caught out by nightfall."

Angelo nodded, and then pulled back, turning his skill off and standing up to a crouch.

Slowly, they made their way up the mountain, then headed back to the base they called home. Carrying bad news.

The world really had gone mad.

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Ramiro Alvares pulled his jacket closer, trying to keep the cold away. If there was one thing that he hated since the big Light in the sky came, it was that the weather had gone insane. They could have days where the climate was what he knew and expected, and then, suddenly it was as hot as if they were in a desert.

The nights were the worst, it was far colder than what he was used to. But he had to keep watch. He sat in the church tower, looking out at the dark forest surrounding their little... He didn't even know what to call it.

His home was gone, the town of San Pedro had disappeared and was replaced by a deep forest that was didn't belong to anything he knew. The only thing that remained was the church, the square that was in front of it, a piece of the street and three buildings that had been on the other side of it. That was all.

Ramiro had gone through the stages of grief already. He had heard too many stories from other survivors to still have any hope. His wife, his daughters, they were gone. Lost to him forever. He only hoped that God would welcome them, and shelter them from the horror that the world had turned into.

If it wasn't a sin, he probably would've already made sure to follow after them. But he wanted to meet them in Heaven, and so he had to struggle. Padre Rodriguez at least promised that he would see them again. Ramiro held tight to that promise.

As he sat next to the big church bell, trying to keep the cold at bay, something caught his eye. A light source in the distance. His hand was on the rope attached below the bell immediately, ready to sound the alarm. The only thing that held him back was that for a moment he thought he saw people.

He waited a beat, and then as the light came closer he saw that it was indeed people. Two of them, one much shorter than the other. It didn't take long for him to realize that one of them was a child. The other one carried a torch, and moved with a sure and confident gait that made Ramiro's hair raise on his skin.

He let go of the rope and grabbed the hunting rifle next to him, then hefted it and aimed over the wall as they approached the church steps.

"Stop right there!" He yelled, aiming his rifle at the big one. He couldn't see quite well in the dim light of their torch, but the taller one had long hair, and appeared to be a woman.

"Mr. Alvarez? Is that you?" The child yelled back, and Ramiro froze. That voice, it was familiar to him.

"Felix?" He said, hope starting to worm its way into his heart. They had lost too much already, when they had woken up and found the boy gone... It hadn't been an easy time.

"It's me! Can you open the door?"

Ramiro hesitated, he had seen too much horrors to trust immediately. Monsters that mimicked human voice had killed one of his friends before. But... He hadn't seen ones that could take human form. That didn't mean they didn't exist.

"Wait there, don't move!" He yelled and grabbed the ladder, making his way down.

By the time he reached the bottom, Martin stood near the double doors that they had barricaded for the night, a candle already lit in his hand. He slept near it every night, too paranoid to trust just the lookout in the bell tower.

Martin had to have heard him yelling. The others were all probably still asleep in the back part of the church, the old stone walls were pretty thick, he doubted that they heard anything.

"What is it?" Martin asked.

"Felix, and a woman," he said.

Martin gave him a look that Ramiro recognized immediately.

"I know," Ramiro answered the unspoken question. He hefted the rifle in his hands. "That's why I have this thing."

Martin looked at him, then sighed. "You think it's really him?"

"I hope it is," Ramiro answered.

Martin took a long breath, then muttered a prayer while holding the crucifix around his neck. With a nod, he walked over to the door and started moving the barricade out of the way.

A few minutes later they exchanged another look with each other and Ramiro raised his rifle pointing it at the door. Martin picked up the axe that he kept next to his sleeping bag, and then put a hand on the doorknob.

He pulled the door open and they looked outside.

It was a woman, and now up close he saw that she was very tall. Taller than any one of them in the church. She wore dark clothing and had long dark hair. He could barely see her features in the dim light, but she looked attractive, with face made out of sharp lines. Her eyes sparkled with a light that seemed to be breaking against the surface of them.

She had her hands on Felix's shoulders.

"Hello," she dipped her head in greeting. "I'm Estrella. I think that you lost this one, I'm bringing him back home."

She smiled at them, and Ramiro couldn't suppress the shiver that ran down his spine.