

Contains:

Death, violence, child hostages, body horror, foul language, an expectation of the readers' knowledge of and interest in characters that will likely go unmet

Summary of what's happened so far:

A wave of energy, helpfully nicknamed 'The Wave' went over the earth, killing most it touched but mutating the survivors, who began to call themselves affected humans. Society has collapsed. Affected humans Theodore Allred and Cassidy "Cass" Luong made their way to the relative safe haven of New York, but didn't exactly mesh well. Now they and their allies are on the run, trying to get out of the country before they all die, being chased by armies of affected and unaffected humans and picking up more allies along the way.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Week Twenty

The truck pulled up to Angie's Diner, the rest of the convoy taking spots so that no one could attack without warning.

Cass, Theodore, Audrey, Sarah and Hector went up to the door. The sign behind the door read 'closed, come back later'. Someone had written 'never' in black sharpie over the final word.

"Allan? You there?" Cass pushed the door open.

There was no response.

They went in, Hector signaling for more of his troops to follow.

Everyone searched the first floor. Hector leaned over and grabbed a cigarette butt, "Is Allan a smoker?"

"No. He was very proud of how he beat his addiction after Angie was born," Theodore replied, "I suppose he could have fallen back since we met."

Ariel, who had followed Hector inside along with Nico, added, "There were tire tracks outside. Military. Mutant Hunters were here."

The sound of footsteps came from the stairs to the second floor, and Allan Kaur stepped into view, loosely holding a shotgun by his side, "They took Angie."

"Which faction?" Hector asked. He had the least shocked reaction out of all of them.

"The Skeletons. They told me to tell you an ambush point was their camp and ask you to rescue her. If I did that, I would get Angie back."

Hector looked towards Ariel. She nodded, and Hector said, "He's legit."

“So Angie is at their camp?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know,” Allan hadn’t been smoking again, but he hadn’t been sleeping.

“What are you suggesting?” Theodore asked Sarah.

“Pragmatically, we should leave right now, and leave Angie Kaur to her unfortunate fate,” Sarah seemed to have predicted the immediate backlash to that statement, “But if we’re going to do this, we should head straight for their base. Most of The Skeletons will be stationed at the ambush point.”

“You’d better not fucking abandon Angie,” Allan said, tightening his grip on his shotgun.

“We are definitely not doing that,” Audrey said.

“Fuck no,” Cass echoed.

“I do not believe that is the right decision,” Theodore added.

Nico had pulled out a map, saying, “It’s only a couple miles off course. The rest of the group could go on ahead.”

“Well then,” Sarah said, looking directly at Allan, “I’ll pick a strike team, and the rest of us will head to Marilyn’s place. We head out in two hours.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Week Twenty

The strike team consisted of Hector, Marcus, Cass, Sarah, Bee, Ariel, Allan, and several of The Veterans. Nico stayed behind to command the rest of the troops and protect Theodore, Audrey, Jordan, Oliver, and the kids.

They loaded Angie’s toys and the smaller kitchen equipment into the back of the truck and set off.

Theodore and Audrey were in the front seat of the truck. Audrey was having trouble positioning her seatbelt so none of her mouths could gnaw on it.

Theodore looked down, and asked, “Where do they go?”

“The mouths?”

“Yes. Are they connected to your stomach?”

“No. They’re autonomous, but anything they bite into they just end up spitting it out.”

“That is not comforting.”

She nodded, “It’s gross.”

“Was that your only change after the Wave hit?”

“Yeah. I thought I wasn’t affected at all, and then one of the affected kids stabbed me. Two hours later, the wound turned into a mouth. This one,” she pointed at a penny-sized mouth on her arm.

“Any wound you have turns into a mouth? Does that include mosquito bites?”

“Mosquito bites, gunshots, papercuts, stab wounds, small pricks... Everything. And it hurts to grow new teeth from nothing.”

“That makes sense. You mask it well.”

“I got used to it. How about you? Did you get all that immediately?”

“Yes. I molt. And I primarily eat insects,” As he was saying that, a fly buzzed past him. He grabbed it with one of his hands, and tossed towards his mouth, eight mandibles popping out to pull it inside.

“What? Ew. No. That’s some Cronenberg shit.”

“How is being covered in autonomous mouths not ‘some Cronenberg shit?’”

“We’re both fairly Cronenberg. But I think I’m less Cronenberg than you.”

“Most of his works try to show normal people who suddenly mutate into something that’s recognizable as once being human, but are visibly weird. I think you have more of the first aspect than me.”

“So you’re saying you’re too perverse to be a perversion of humanity?”

Theodore laughed, “I guess so.”

Nico interrupted, calling in on the CB radio, “We’re being followed by the rest of The Skeletons. They’re angry.”

Theodore was already going as fast as he could, but tried to push on it anyway, “I believe we can infer why.”

Interlude Five

Week Twenty

Angie Kaur was strapped to a chair on the top floor of a three-story building. They had been only feeding her two times a day, but she was too scared to be hungry.

There were only three people on her floor, a man named Brett who commanded the others and smoked like Dad said he used to, and two other people who Brett called names Dad said were very unkind.

Brett walked up to the window, outside of her field of vision, “How did those fuckers end up here? That fuck doesn’t even know where we—”

Angie tried to look away at the bang, but the ropes were too tight. Blood splattered around the room, and Brett fell to the ground, a hole in his forehead. She couldn’t hear anything.

Angie closed her eyes.

Minutes later, something collided with the chair, toppling it. She told herself there was no way of being sure what it was, and that she shouldn’t think about it. She thought about it anyway.

As her ears stopped ringing, she slowly heard more screams. They kept getting louder. Angie barely opened her eyes, and slowly made her way behind a nearby desk. She couldn't move her hands to cover her ears, no matter how hard she tried.

Glass shattered.

Three people screamed, almost covering what sounded like a small firecracker.

She thought she heard a lightning strike.

There were more screams, and more bangs, and she couldn't avoid them. The air smelled like copper.

Minutes later, someone staggered into the room, yelling, "Where the f*** did you go, kid?"

There was a shotgun blast.

"Sweetie, where are you? I need to know you're safe."

"Dad?" She stopped struggling against the bonds, "Is that you?"

"Angie," his voice said, "Thank God you're safe."

Someone shoved the desk aside, dropped something heavy, and began to cut the ropes. When they cut through the ropes, she turned to look at their face.

"Dad?" Allan Kaur had a large cut on his forehead. It was openly bleeding.

"It's me, Angie. It's me," He grabbed her tight, crying.

"Why are you crying, Dad? I'm okay."

"I know. I know. When we get to the ship, I'm going to make you an extra big mac and cheese grilled cheese."

"The ship?"

He picked her up, cradling her in his arms, "I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here and get cleaned up, alright?"

When she was older, she would ask how many people he killed to rescue her. But that day, she was content to stay in his arms and squeeze him as tight as she could.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Week Twenty

They had been driving for three hours, and finally got sight of *The New Horizon*. There was a barbed-wire fence around the entrance to the docks.

Andrea was on her phone, calling her sister, "Marilyn! Open the gate now! Mutant Hunters are in hot pursuit!"

Theodore was on the CB radio, "Nico! Did you manage to get any of their trucks?"

They were pulling past the fence when Nico finally managed to respond. His speech was slow, and he was coughing, “By the time the rest of the Veterans get to you, there should be at most three trucks left. The rest of the Veterans will get to you guys before they do. You’ll be fine.”

“Nico, what are you going to do?”

“Tell Hector and Marcus I died well, and that there won’t be a body for the funeral.”

Nico left the channel.

Audrey looked at Theodore, “Shit.”

Marilyn approached the truck, holding a machine gun. She was flanked by eight teenagers with longbows and modified SWAT gear.

“Hey, sis. Ready to load up?”

Audrey took a deep breath, and looked at Theodore, “We’ll need to be fast. People first, then food and supplies, then entertainment, then the cooking stuff.”

“What went wrong?”

“We lost somebody,” Audrey was already walking towards the back of the truck.

“Let’s get to work so we don’t lose more.”

Jordan and some of the kids went inside first, and the rest of the group worked on emptying the truck. They made good progress, getting to the halfway point with the books when the rest of The Veterans showed up.

The leader, ashen-faced, said, “The Skeletons aren’t far behind. We need to prepare.”

Marilyn nodded and started closing the door to the truck, “Non-combatants, get inside. We’ll figure out rooms later. Me, the Arrowheads, and The Veterans will take position on the ship.”

“The Arrowheads?” Danny asked, looking at the eight Arrowheads behind her, “Are those child soldiers?”

The apparent leader of the Arrowheads, wearing a red hoodie underneath her combat gear, stepped forward, “We’re college students. By definition, we’re not child soldiers.”

“Sorry. I had to make sure.”

“What would you have done if we were child soldiers?” she said as everyone boarded the ship.

“Stopped you?”

“...Okay,” she nodded, “Sasha Bliss. You?”

“Danny Boyle.”

“Well, Danny, let’s kill these fucks.”

Theodore, Audrey, and Oliver entered the main cafeteria, which was crowded with around thirty children. Jordan came up to the three of them, looking worried.

“The kids are on edge. They all heard about the mutant hunters. I don’t really know how to interact with kids, so I need your help with this.”

Theodore looked around, and asked, “Did we manage to get the picture books in here yet?”
“Some of them,” Audrey said, “What are we going to do?”
“What do you think? We are going to have storytime.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Week Twenty

They had made their way through *Where the Wild Things Are* and were two-thirds of the way through *Caps for Sale* when the Skeletons arrived. Theodore spoke louder to try to stop the kids from hearing it, and hoped he was successful.

When he finished the book, they could all hear gunfire. Audrey took charge, grabbing *Dragons Love Tacos* and began reading it out as quickly as possible.

Halfway through, Marilyn opened the door, saying, “We’re safe.”

Theodore shushed her and said not to interrupt in the middle of storytime. After *Dragons Love Tacos* was finished, Theodore said, “Do you want to read more books or help unload the truck?”

Most of the younger kids wanted to continue storytime.

Audrey said, “You take the older kids and keep unloading. I’ve got this.”

Theodore, Oliver, and thirteen kids helped Marilyn, the Arrowheads, and The Veterans unload the truck. Three books later, Audrey came with seven more kids. They finished unloading by eleven, and started unloading The Veterans’ truck. The strike team’s truck roared in, barely stopping to wait for the gate to open.

“What’s wrong?” Theodore asked.

Cass stepped out of the truck, saying, “The Pigeon Queen’s forces will be here in two hours. We need to get out of the dock soon.”