

Monsters in Us All

It was always theorized, discussed exclusively as a hypothetical situation. People were either really interested in the topic, or thought it was the stupidest concept in the world. I, myself, belonged to the latter group of individuals. However, people can no longer be dismissive of the idea because two years ago there was an outbreak of a violent viral infection. Our beautiful Earth has been torn apart by the apocalypse, split into two main parties: humanity and the walking dead.

My name is Tanner Yates, and I am seventeen years old. My once carefree life is long gone. Now I'm just another soldier in this war. Another target for our enemies. Another doomed life. When the infection first began to spread like wildfire, a gang of zombies broke into our home, ravenous. I watched them tear apart and devour my parents, older brother and little sister. There was no coming back for them. Their bodies were dismembered, completely mutilated, in much too horrible a state to be resurrected as one of the animate corpses.

Always the optimist, I found a silver lining that allowed me to maintain a shred of hope. My younger brother, Daniel, had fled towards the back of the house during the attack. Once I'd made it out outside I'd searched frantically, but never found him. Some may have considered this a bad sign, but as long as there was no body to be found, I knew there was a chance that Danny was still alive. Maybe he was holed up somewhere with others trying to stay out of harm's way, or working to find a cure – he was a *very* smart and compassionate boy. If anybody was fit to help create an antidote, it was Danny.

Although he had a good head on his shoulders, I still worried for him. At this point in time he would only be the ripe old age of fifteen. How could the stress of the apocalypse be affecting him?

“Tanner!” someone exclaimed, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me from my thoughts.

I jumped, glaring at him. “Piper,” I grunted in annoyance as my good friend, Doug Piper, smiled at me. A year older than me, he was a pleasant, upbeat, energetic guy. Maybe a little *too* energetic sometimes – I often thought it was suitable that we called Piper by his last name, since he never seemed to pipe down – but he was one of my best friends in this new world. A nice contrast to the somber, bleak existence we led. “Keep your voice down,” I reminded him in a hushed tone. “There isn’t much noise around here to drown us out. It wouldn’t be hard for them to hear us.”

Piper rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to be so loud.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it,” I said comfortingly, patting his shoulder. “Once we find a new hideout, we can relax a little bit.” Our most recent hideout had been invaded in the middle of the night, and we’d been trudging aimlessly ever since, just hoping for a structure sturdy enough to protect us even for a few hours so we could recharge. Being out in the open was very unwise, but we didn’t have much of a choice. Knowing at any moment a hoard of monsters could appear, everyone was very tense - except for Piper, of course.

“Lord knows we could use a little piece of mind,” muttered Josie, stomping up beside us. She was my age and height with an athletic build. A very nurturing girl, she often cared for the wounded, but she was also tough and could most certainly hold her own. She wasn’t afraid to

talk back to even the biggest of guys when she disagreed with something. From the looks of the scowl on her face, she'd been doing just that before joining us.

“What’s crackin’ with the captain?” Piper asked, raising an eyebrow.

She huffed, eyes rolling in annoyance. “I was concerned about us being out in these wide open spaces, so I asked Harrison if he knew what he was doing. He says he’s completely and utterly certain that there’s a big warehouse not far from here. He remembers because he lived in this area when he was younger. Told me not to worry, we’ll reach safety soon enough. Then he sent me off to...” Josie took a pause, a repulsed look crossing her face, “*calm down.*”

Piper and I cringed in unison. “Damn,” I muttered. “Brave man.” I understood her irritation, but honestly, I wasn’t worried. It *was* Harrison, after all. Although he wasn’t the oldest or the biggest of our group, he was the most strategically intelligent. He was also courageous, strong, mature, and very compassionate. Selfless as one could be, he never failed to put us before himself. His twentieth birthday had been the week before, but he had given it no recognition. Similarly, Harrison failed to acknowledge that within our small army of roughly two dozen, he was our unofficial leader.

“Everybody!” Harrison’s best friend and right-hand man, Casey, hissed suddenly. “Listen.”

Of course, we obeyed our second-in-command. Falling into complete silence, our miniature militia listened attentively. A distant noise drifted over us, the sounds of shuffling and mumbling.

“They’re here,” Piper whispered, his eyes widening.

“Everybody, go!” Harrison barked harshly.

Go we did! We took off running as though it were our last day, which was a scarily real possibility. My muscles already ached from walking such a distance. Every time I moved, pain shot through my body, but I knew I couldn’t stop.

Beside me, Josie looked over her shoulder. “Crap. Keep running!”

“The hell does it look like I’m doing?!” Braxton snapped at her, running between us. He was the youngest of our group at just ten years of age. His blond hair was tousled and matted with sweat, his brown eyes narrowed and determined. We were all very protective of him – whether he liked to admit it or not, he was only a child – but he was cold as ice, tough as nails, and handled every situation without fear. In fact, he was keen on keeping most of his emotions hidden, save for frustration, anger, and annoyance. He would be a good, strong leader like Harrison if not for his age. “The creeps aren’t gonna catch us unless we waste our energy yapping!”

He had a point. We all shut up, weary bodies propelling us across the barren landscape of disarray, cracked pavement beneath our feet. Empty, disrupted houses were strewn about the area, none of which could provide us with protection. Their windows were broken, doors ripped from their hinges – they could already be inhabited by those we were trying to outrun. Whatever warehouse Harrison was talking about, I hoped it would suffice as our shelter.

I heard shrieking somewhere behind me – they had seen us. Daring to look over my shoulder, I saw them, teeth bared and angry snarls ringing through the air. Oh yes. They knew what they wanted. I tried to make myself run faster, but that seemed impossible. We maintained a safe distance between us; contrary to popular belief, the average zombie is not really faster or

slower than the average human, just a little more uncoordinated, which can sometimes lead them to lose the race. Despite this, both sides seemed to be on top of their game for this particular chase. It was a real nail-biter, and seemed as though it was going to be a matter of who got tired-out first.

“This way!” Harrison bellowed suddenly, throwing himself into a ditch to his left. We all followed obediently, ducking down to shield our heads as we crawled after him. Ahead of us I saw the end of a drain pipe. *Perfect*, I thought. *They won’t follow us in here*.

Light and warmth shifted to darkness and chill as we entered the metal cylinder. A dank, dirty, metallic smell filled the air. We were hunched over, crawling on all fours. I was surprised some of the bigger guys could even fit. Then again, in this apocalyptic world we were living in, decent meals were becoming increasingly hard to come by. Our “bigger guys” weren’t exactly that big.

“You okay, Braxton?” I asked, noticing that he was the one crawling in front of me.

“I’m fine,” he grumbled. “Worry about yourself, Yates.”

Rolling my eyes, I looked over my shoulder at Josie. She didn’t look very satisfied. I could see doubt, clear as day, in her dark eyes. I admired the fact that she moved against the grain. While most of us just trusted what Harrison said – naturally, as our leader, he was quite the level-headed individual – she dared to question his reasoning, strategy, and authority, among other things. Even so, she never tried to take his power from him. She just liked to make sure he knew what he was doing. I knew she trusted him deep down. After all, Harrison always came out on top no matter what, and as a result, so did the rest of us.

There was no way to keep track of time in the abyss. There was no visible sunlight, and none of us had any working cell phones or watches. We could have been crawling for twenty minutes, or it could have been an hour, but no matter how long it took us we eventually came to the end of the pipe. Light winked at us from the inviting circular exit, and we all tumbled out of the unpleasant prison, one by one. I almost landed on Braxton, who glowered sourly at me.

As we stretched out our bodies, groaning and cracking our bones, Harrison turned to us with a broad smile on his face. “Well,” he exclaimed proudly, “what did I say?”

Before we could ask him what he meant, our gazes fell beyond him and onto the old, rundown building nestled at the edge of the trees. It was worn, but looked sturdy, and anything that wasn’t secure could likely be barricaded. I felt euphoria rush through my body. You don’t know what real gratitude feels like until you’re thankful for a rotten warehouse to use as a temporary home.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” murmured Josie. “You really *did* know where you were going.”

“I did indeed,” he replied with a chuckle. “What have you to say, o ye of little faith?”

Josie smirked and walked past him. “What say I, Harrison? I say you got lucky this time. Keep up the good work. It’ll go much easier for you that way.”

Harrison laughed. “Very good. I should be more cautious of you than the monsters.” He looked at the rest of us. “Well, what are you all standing around here for? Let’s get inside.”

He didn’t have to tell us twice. We all took off as fast as our weary bodies could go. It was cold inside, but we didn’t mind. We’d probably find some way to keep warm. Even if we didn’t, it was alright; comfort wasn’t a necessity given the circumstances. As soon as the last

person passed through the front doors we slammed them shut, pushing heavy cabinets and chairs against them. We blocked what we could, and even found some tools and planks that allowed us to board up the more vulnerable windows. I already felt safer. I felt...content.

That was the strange thing. Regardless of having lost most of my family, the uncertainty of my brother's presence in the world, and the daily threat of being killed...I was not unhappy. I had friends who were a lot like a family to me. I was safe, at least for the time being. In times such as those of the apocalypse, that's all one can really ask for.

I strolled over to Piper, who was peering at the orange sky through the slats of a boarded window. "Hey," I greeted him quietly, standing beside him. He didn't say anything, so I ventured conversation. "What are you thinking about?"

He smiled sadly and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, not much. Just the general, existential crap, you know?"

I did know. In this new world, it was common for everybody to have those thoughts cross their minds occasionally. Even Piper. I myself had been swept away from reality by a tortuous mental vortex several times before. People often tried to conceal it, but talking really did help stop the process. "What kind of existential crap?"

Piper shrugged again. "What will happen to us when this is all over? Will we still be around when it ends?" Piper's voice wavered as he whispered, "Will it ever end?"

I nodded firmly. "It will," I assured him. "One way or another, it has to end."

His brows drew together in thought. "How can it end?"

“It can end in one of two ways,” interjected Casey, joining us. He must have overheard our discussion. “Either they find a cure for the virus...” He took a significant pause before finishing, “...or one side destroys the other completely.”

I sighed. “So, either somebody concocts some miracle of a cure, zombies eat all humans, or humans destroy all zombies.”

“Those options sound promising,” Piper commented sarcastically.

“Come on, Pipes,” said Casey, ruffling Piper’s hair. “We need your cheer, your spirit. Don’t break on us now. The end is a bridge that will be crossed once it’s reached.”

Yeah, I thought dully, but once we cross that bridge there’s no turning back.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Piper agreed, seeming to perk up slightly.

Relieved he appeared to be feeling better, I left the two of them talking by the window and approached Braxton. He was curled up on a pile of sandbags, apparently trying to take a nap. I knelt down next to him, and upon hearing me he opened one eye. “What do you want now, Yates? I’m trying to sleep.”

“I know,” I told him. I removed my hoodie and draped it over his small frame. It was dirty and torn, but it would be more comfortable than the stale, frigid air.

Braxton blinked. “Oh...thank you.”

“You’re welcome, buddy,” I said quietly. I could barely find the willpower to resist stroking his hair like I used to do to my little sister.

That night, I was lying on the cold concrete, an old sandbag beneath my head. I was cold, but I didn't mind. It was uncomfortable, but not unbearable. My stomach growled, and I touched it absent-mindedly. We had now run out of food. We desperately needed more rations. We needed our strength if we wanted to survive.

“We’re leaving tomorrow to get food,” Harrison informed me with a yawn. He was stretched out on his back beside me, nothing beneath his skull but the concrete floor. I felt embarrassed. He must have heard my stomach rumbling.

I nodded. “Good.” I was silent for a moment before asking, “And what if we run into the monsters who were chasing us today?”

Harrison stared at the ceiling, seeming to mull this over before answering, “We will fight them. We cannot let them compromise our survival. Food is worth the risk.”

I agreed with him. We’d fought before for things such as food and shelter, losing people in the process. Nevertheless, the battles had to be fought, even if it made me sick to think about it.

“Not looking forward to that,” I muttered.

Harrison shook his head, “None of us ever are. But it has to be done.”

“I-I understand,” I stammered, “but...it doesn’t feel right...killing them. I mean, infected or not, we’re all human underneath. They’re only trying to survive on this hellhole of a planet like we are. They don’t have any other choice.”

“Neither do we,” Harrison said sternly. “Face it, Tanner. There are monsters in us all. Whether we can see them or not, they *are* there. Some people can keep them hidden, can restrain

them and keep them down, but no matter what, they are *always* there. That's the just the way life is.”

As metaphorical as it was, it made sense to me. “I understand.”

“Good. Now, go to sleep,” he slurred drowsily as he rolled onto his side. “Early rise tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, closing my eyes. I didn’t feel sleepy, yet my body throbbed with exhaustion. It was so nice to be still. To be safe. Even just until the crack of dawn.

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I woke up the next morning to the sound of bustling people. Again, with no means of telling time, I could only assume it was very early in the morning. People were waking from their slumber, leaving the comfort of whatever sandbag, rag, or piece of concrete they’d curled up on.

I pushed myself groggily to my feet, looking around. There was really nothing of any use we needed to take in case we didn’t come back. Still, I hoped we wouldn’t be followed back so we could return to the warehouse. It was the best shelter we’d had in a long time.

“Okay, everybody, here’s the plan!” shouted Harrison over the ruckus. “We are leaving to find food and that is it! As soon as we find a sensible amount, we will return to this building. That is, if it’s still safe for us to do so. Do you all understand?”

We all understood.

We headed out into the bright sunlight and began what would be a long search. We would find a scrap of food here and there, but not nearly enough to divide amongst us all. For hours we searched abandoned buildings, ditches, dumpsters, even rivers, but it looked like any

food that had been left conveniently laying around had already been picked up by wanderers like ourselves or by the wildlife.

After twelve hours of hunting for food, we were becoming desperate. Most of our troop was growing faint from hunger. Even Braxton seemed a little unsteady on his feet. I glanced at Harrison, who looked anxious. Of course, he was nervous, too. We'd never had to go so long without food.

Suddenly, as he was about to round the corner of a building, Harrison halted abruptly, making some of us bump into each other. He whispered something to Casey, and slowly the message was passed back down the line: food. There was food to be had on the other side of the street. Unfortunately, we would have to deal with what looked like some pretty vicious monsters. We would have to fight for our food and survival.

Harrison asked us if anybody wanted to protest. Nobody did. I wasn't surprised; we were all so hungry. Risking our lives was worth putting an end to the torture in our abdomens. Harrison began to count down quietly from ten, while I repeated the same words in my head over and over: *We don't have a choice, either. We don't have a choice, either.*

Harrison shouted, "GO", and so we went. The monsters howled in surprise, turning on us with their teeth gritted and their stances locked. Gunfire rang through the air, teeth tore flesh, blood splattered, and people from both sides screamed in agony.

I searched the ground for a discarded piece of food – *anything* that would allow me to avoid hurting anyone and spare my conscience – but I saw nothing. In my frantic search, I turned quickly and collided with one the monsters, falling against the brick wall behind me. Looking up, I locked eyes with my opponent...and I realized what a predicament I was in.

Danny was glaring down at me, his face stone-cold. I couldn't believe it. He was...he was one of *them*. One of those... *monsters*. The same monsters who made us fear to close our eyes at night, to turn our backs. He was looking at me as though I were just another enemy.

“Da...Danny,” I croaked hoarsely, even though I knew he couldn’t understand me.

Danny studied me attentively, and slowly, his expression softened and his eyes widened. I couldn't believe it. He recognized me! He knew me! “Tanner...” He was barely audible over the combat around us, as though he couldn't quite find his voice.

“I can't believe it's you!” I cried, whether Danny knew what I was saying or not. “I'm so happy I found you!”

Danny didn't react to my words. I wished he could comprehend them. A pained look crossed his face, like he was extremely conflicted. He observed the carnage all around us, then looked at me again. This time, his eyes had a glazed look about them.

A bolt of terror ripped through my body. The look in Danny's eyes...he was detaching himself. Mentally removing himself from the situation at hand, and I knew why.

It would be less emotionally devastating for him to kill me.

“Danny, no, please,” I begged, but only quietly so I wouldn't waste my breath. I knew pleading was useless. Even if he could have understood me, I wouldn't have been able to change his mind, and I could never kill Danny, which meant I was about to die. “Please don't. We can figure this out, I promise.”

Danny bit his lip, eyes welling up with tears. “I’m so sorry, big brother,” he whispered, his voice anguished. “I love you so, *so* much.” Taking a deep breath, he pointed his gun at my head and whispered his parting words:

“I love you, Tanner.”

A venomous snarl to my left made me turn. Harrison leapt onto my brother, knocking him to the ground. Before I could realize what was happening, our leader ripped off a piece of my brother’s neck with his teeth. My brother shot at him, missing his head several times. Blood dripping from his mouth, Harrison threw back his head and roared into the air.

I didn’t know what to do. Harrison and my brother were trying to murder each other. I didn’t want to attack Harrison, but I wanted to help my brother. I couldn’t do both, and as it turned out, I didn’t need to decide. Something exploded near my head and the world drowned in a black abyss. An abyss just like the drain pipe.

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I was unconscious for a few hours. Upon waking, I was greeted by Josie gently wiping my face with a wet rag. I squinted as the world came into focus. “What happened?” I wheezed gruffly.

She pursed her lips. “Somebody threw a grenade. Knocked you out cold. You’re lucky. You could’ve ended up like doofus over there.”

“Hey,” Piper whined, “it wasn’t my fault.”

I turned my head slowly and looked at Piper, coming to realize there was now a stump where his right arm should have been. “Oh my God, Piper, are you okay?”

“Meh, it didn’t really hurt,” he said indifferently. Plopping down next to me, he smiled. “Hey, on the bright side, at least they come in pairs!”

I smirked, amused by his lack of grief for his lost limb. Sitting up gingerly, I looked at Josie. “Did you eat?” I asked her.

“We certainly did,” she told me, smiling slightly. I knew it was true, as I could still see pieces of flesh caught in her bloodstained teeth. “Don’t worry, we brought you back something, too.” She reached behind her and tossed me a severed leg. “A lot of meat on that one. It’ll last you a while.”

I exhaled blissfully, looking at it. “Thank you.” I appreciatively sunk my teeth into it and tore off a piece, eating it slowly to savour the pure nirvana that washed over me as a result.

I heard the speedy pattering of footsteps, and had just laid down the leg when Braxton came barreling towards me from the other side of the warehouse. He threw himself at me, and for a brief moment I wondered what I’d done to piss him off this time – until I noticed that he was not fighting me, but hugging me.

“You’re okay,” he mumbled into my chest, his voice trembling.

I gazed at him in pure awe. “Of course I am, Braxton. You need a little more than a grenade to keep me down.” I was taken aback by this show of affection, particularly by the fact that it was towards me.

Suddenly, it all came flooding back. Danny. Danny was one of those *monsters*, those *zombie hunters*. I still couldn’t believe it. The Danny I knew would never hurt a fly, much less his own brother, even if I was a cannibalistic beast. It wasn’t as though I could *help* what I was. I

felt heartbroken, remembering the day the zombies invaded our home. After seeing the rest of our family die, Danny and I had both fled, but with a hoard of zombies between us, we had to go our separate ways. It just so happened that I was bitten on the shoulder before escaping the house. In just minutes, I became one of the undead, but it didn't stop me from searching for my brother. Yes, as zombies, we were less civilized than the uninfected, but it didn't mean our minds were totally altered. We could recognize our family, could understand English even though the virus meant we could no longer coherently speak it, and if our hunger wasn't extreme enough to take over our cognitive function, we could sometimes refrain from attacking certain people if we tried hard enough. I had never considered us monsters. Just very, very sick humans.

How had Danny become a hunter? How long had he been one? How many of us had he killed? Was he told he didn't have a choice, or did he take the gun without protest? All of these questions stirred in my mind, but I asked the one that haunted me most: "Where is Danny right now?"

Piper frowned, looking puzzled. "Who?"

"Did you see? The guy that almost shot me, that Harrison..." I trailed off. Of course they hadn't noticed. They'd been famished and in the midst of feeding. I was lucky they'd noticed me get knocked out.

"Tanner, no humans made it out of that scrap," Josie told me indifferently, obviously not picking up on the fact that the name was of some significance to me.

I felt my stomach, now partially full of raw flesh, drop. "None of the humans were turned?" I murmured, fearing confirmation. "They were all picked clean?"

“Yes, they were.” Worry lines formed on her forehead as she looked at me with concern.

“Why?”

I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t find words to describe the feeling, not even to myself. I inhaled sharply, stroking Braxton’s matted, dirty hair. “No...no reason. Where’s Harrison? I want to talk to him.”

Casey, who was sitting on a large wooden crate, clasped his hands in front of him and shook his head. “That will be difficult.”

“Why is that?” I inquired, pulling a tiny piece of metal shrapnel from the rotten skin on the back of my hand.

Casey looked down at floor. “His brains are splattered all over the road.”

This time, I did not hide the horror I felt. Turning to look at Casey, I shouted in disbelief, “They killed Harrison?!”

Casey nodded grimly. “One quick blow to the head.” He made a fake gun with his fingers and held it to his temple. “*Pew!* That was all it took. He was gone. Just like that...”

Looking around after hearing this new information, I now saw how solemn everyone looked. They were mourning the loss of our dear friend and leader, and all of a sudden, so was I, but my grief was twice that of anybody there. That day, I had lost two brothers: one a brother of blood, the other a brother of survival.

“I need a minute,” I said curtly, moving Braxton aside and getting to my feet. I ran, wobbling, for the front door, pushing the barricade aside and bursting out into the setting sun. I took a deep breath of air. It was thick and humid, tasting of blood and gunpowder. I put my

hands on my thighs and doubled over, thinking I was going to be sick. Naturally, bile never rose. Falling to my knees, I put my face in my hands, shaking as I tried to contain the sobs threatening to escape.

What had happened out there after I lost consciousness? I couldn't help but wonder if Harrison had been the one to finish Danny off, but at the same time, I was curious as to whether or not Danny was the one that blew Harrison's skull to pieces. Both incidents couldn't have happened. Hopefully neither of them had. At any rate, I would never know the difference.

I desperately wanted to feel angry, but I didn't know who to be mad at. It was almost humorous that at this particularly devastating point in time, in the midst of a global war, after losing two people very close to me, I could not find my anger. Harrison's words echoed in my head.

There are monsters in us all.

He was right. No words had ever been truer. To us, the hunters were the monsters, heartlessly slaughtering us when we were sick despite ourselves, when we needed human flesh to survive because we honestly could not sustain ourselves on anything else. To the hunters and every person who had ever heard the word "zombie", *we* were the monsters; senseless, disgusting abominations who lived off of death. While neither side was exactly what the other viewed them to be, we were all, in our own right, monsters. Yes, there are indeed monsters in us all. We just never see them in ourselves.

And on that day, having lost the last of my biological family, I returned to the warehouse, to what was left of my *other* family of monsters.