

Bitten  
By Ethan Pranger

My heart races and my lungs burn as my feet slap against the icy concrete, my legs carrying me farther and farther from my shambling pursuers, a pack of undead hunting for their next meal. They aren't the fastest or brightest creatures, but they are undeniably deadly in large groups, and this is the largest I've seen. Howling wind a snowflakes whip against my face as I blindly run through the blizzard, when I see the faint outline of a building materializing about 30 feet away. *Please don't be barricaded*, I think as I throw myself at the door. Luckily, the door crashes open with a loud bang as I am sent sprawling to the ground. I gasp for air, when I hear a soft click and I feel the barrel of a gun being placed at the back of my head.

"Don't move," a deep and harsh voice whispers in my ear, "Move, and I'll blow your goddamn head off. Understand?" I nod my head in compliance. "Meghan, barricade the door." I hear feet quietly move towards the door, and the door softly being shut, and the sound of things being dragged in front of the door. "What's your name?" The voice demands.

"Lila," I manage to choke out, trying not to sound as terrified as I am. I feel my gun in its holster at my hip, and the thought of trying to fight back crosses my mind, but I know it will be useless. By the time I reach it, the voice would have already put a bullet in my head. I don't want to die here, not like this. "Look, I don't want any trouble."

"Were you bit?" The voice says, flat, emotionless. I shake my head no -- being bit is a death sentence. You'll die from the infection if other survivors don't kill you first when they find out. "Check her," the voice says to the other woman, and I feel the voice's hand against the back of my head, forcing it to the ground, pinning me down with his knee on the center of the back. I try to resist, attempting to wiggle out from underneath him, but that makes him only dig his knee deeper into my back, causing me to wince in pain. "Don't try to resist," he hisses, "It will only make this harder for you." Gentle hands roll up my sleeves and pant legs.

"She's clean." A mousey voice whispers. The voice removes his knee from my back, allowing me to get a full breath of air for the first time in what felt like centuries. I look up to look at my assailants, and I see a tall, lean man who looks surprisingly well fed, and a short, slender woman, looking almost as pale as the snow outside. The man offers me his hand, and I take it as a sign of good faith.

"Sorry about that." the man says, gentler now. If I didn't know better, I would never have known that this was the same man who just moments ago held a gun to my head. "You can never be too careful when meeting people out here. "I'm Eric, and that's my sister, Meghan." He says, motioning to the quiet, slender woman in the corner.

"Lila," I repeat, louder and more confident this time. I look around at the room I'm in. A long, arching room with high ceiling and an archway at the other side. Trophy cases line the walls on each side. "Where are we?" I ask.

"We think it was a school before the outbreak. It seems like it's clear of the dead, but we only just arrived when you came barging through the doors." Eric says warmly. "We got surrounded by a group of those damned freaks, but we managed to escape here for safety. It's a miracle neither of us got bit. So are you alone?"

I nod. "I had a group, but damn raiders came and took over our colony. Told us we had to leave or die. My mother," I say, managing to stifle a sob, "We got separated by the blizzard. I was looking for her when I wandered into a hoard of the undead." I look over at Meghan and see her nursing a bleeding wound on her arm. "Are you ok?" I ask, walking over to Meghan. I reach out to inspect her arm.

"I-I'm fine." She says timidly, pulling her arm away. "I just cut myself on some glass, that's all."

"Are you sure?" I persist. "I was a nurse before the world went to hell. It looks like it's bleeding pretty badly. You might need stitches." I pull a small first aid kit out of my bag.

"N-no, I said I'm fine." Meghan says in protest, taking a few steps back.

"Meghan, are you ok?" Eric says approaching the woman. Meghan opens her mouth to protest, but before any words can come out, Eric rolls up her sleeve, revealing a deep gash in Meghan's forearm. The teeth marks at the edge of the wound are clear indications that the wound wasn't caused by glass.

My hand reaches for the pistol at my hips, and I aim it at Meghan, but Eric steps in the way, aiming his gun at me. "Eric, what are you doing? She's bit, it's only a matter of time before she turns."

"No she's not." He snaps in the same harsh tone of voice when we first met. "You heard her, it was glass. Not a bite!"

"Eric, please! I know it's hard, but this is what we need to do. It's what is safe for everyone."

"I swear to god, Lila, I will kill you if you try to hurt her! Put the gun down, now!" I don't listen. My fingers wrap around the trigger, ready to fire, when Eric lunges at him. My muscles react, but not in time. His strong arms swing at my arms, disrupting my aim, and the gun fires, lodging a bullet into the ceiling above us. He's on top of me before I know it, his hands wrapped around my throat. I punch at his arms helplessly, but he won't budge. He grip tightens around my neck, and the edges of my vision begin to go dark.

"Stop!" Meghan's squeaks from the corner of the room. "Please, Eric, stop." Eric grip loosens, allowing me to breathe freely. I gasp in air, and we both look across the room at Meghan, holding a gun to her head.

"Meghan, what are you doing?" Eric gasps. "Come on, put the gun down. That's not funny."

"I'm sorry, Eric," Meghan cries, "But Lila's right. I'm a danger to you. It's only a matter of time before I become one of those things. I don't want to hurt you, Eric."

"Please Meghan," Eric begs, tears streaming down his face, "Don't do this! I can't lose you. First Dad, then Mom, I can't lose you too! You're the only family I have left. I can't survive this alone."

"I'm sorry, I love you so much. I'll tell Mom and Dad you're ok." Meghan whispers softly, closing her eyes.

"Meghan, Meghan, No!" But it's too late. I flinch as a gunshot rings out, followed by the soft thud of Meghan's body hitting the floor. "Meghan!" Eric sobs, crawling over to his sister's lifeless body, cradling it in his arms.

"Eric," I say, still gasping for air, "I'm so sorry Eric. I know how hard this must be."

“You,” Eric growls, “This is your fault! It’s your fault my sister is dead!” He scrambles to his feet, ready to lunge at me. I dive for my gun on the ground. My hands wrap around the handle and I roll onto my back, raising the gun at Eric as he lunges through the air towards me. My finger instinctively pulls the trigger, and Eric’s body crashes into me, but he doesn’t struggle or move. I push his still lifeless body off of mine, and climb to my feet. I feel a burning sensation behind my eyes as tears begin to well up. *It was him or me*, I tell myself. *I had to do it, or he would have killed me*. I repeat these thoughts to myself, but in the back of my mind, I begin to wonder. Was there another way? Did it have to end like that? I let out a guttural scream as tears begin to stream down my face. Is this the world now? Is this the kind of things I have to expect from now on? Is this kind of world worth living in, knowing that its kill or be killed. I sob and slam my fists onto the cheap, linoleum tiles, the skin on my knuckles splitting on impact.

I rise on shaky legs and tear apart the crudely made barricade blocking the door. I throw open the door and scream into the white nothingness. “Come on! Come and get me! I’m right here! What are you waiting for!” As if answering my calls, the silhouettes of shambling figures appear through the wind and snow. My knees buckle beneath my weight. *Good, it’s about time. I’m done trying to fight this.*