The leaders of the five largest settlements walked out of the conference with newfound confidence, Kaz knew they had come to their decision.

Walking to a podium in front of thousands of people, the mediator walked up to the podium and made his announcement, “Today marks the day central New York makes huge step towards peace. The settlements of Morrisville, Sherrill, Munnsville, Oneida and Hamilton have unanimously voted to join the Alliance of Independent Forces. Together we will be able to collectively secure our lands from those who seek to rob us of it.” The crowd erupts with cheer for the unification. In this moment, they feel invincible.

Loading up in the military truck, Kaz pauses in hesitation and looks down at a picture, “Love you to the moon and back” is written neatly on the back. Pushed out of the way by another soldier he snaps back to their task and hops in the truck. Loaded up with men and equipment, the truck engine roars to life and hauls them to their new home.

“Hey Kaz.”

Kaz looks over at the soldier next to him, the name on his uniform reads the name Miller, “What’s up?”

“You good man? You looked pretty shaken up back there.”

“Y-yeah, just reminds me of when we got shipped out the first time.”

“Hey, it’s not gonna be like that this time, they didn’t tell us what was going on then. We’re prepared now.”

“I know, I know. I just won’t want to put her through that again.”

“We’re all coming back man; you know how they operate. They’re going to make all this song and dance about it and then go back home.”

“I hope you’re right.”, Kaz says as he looks down at the floor of the truck. His eyes close as they drift in and out of sleep.

Waking up to the feeling of the truck stopping, Kaz finds himself in his new home, Cazenovia. Located a few miles west of Morrisville, Cazenovia is an important strategic asset as it is along the main route to Syracuse from Morrisville. The size of Cazenovia relative to nearby towns is also important as it can support a large fighting force far better than other towns in the area.

As soldiers unload from the trucks, they gather with their squad leader and learn of their objectives for the day. Kaz and a few others gather around Miller as he says, “Alright, our squad has been tasked with double checking security. All the scouts gave us the green light to move up here but all that noise we made to get here definitely caught someone’s attention. Kaz, I want you, David, and Madison to start on the far west side of town in a wide formation and sweep clockwise around the town, we will do the same but starting on the far east side. Give updates every half cycle and move further out from the town every full cycle.”

“Copy that, on it”, Kaz says.

The others nod and follow him. Walking to the edge of town, Kaz and his team sees settlers starting to wander outside and forming into groups.

David says quietly, “Hey Kaz, this seems pretty sketchy to me.”

“We’ll keep an eye on them, but I don’t think they’ll be an issue. A lot of people have heard of the good we do, and I have no doubt they’ll be fine with us being here. They’re just a little stirred up since they probably haven’t seen a military since all this shit started in the first place.”

David nods but still seems uneased. Upon getting to the outskirts of town, the team goes largely silent and patrols the town. A few cycles into their patrol, a large explosion erupts from the town center where the vast majority of the logistics is located.

Miller’s voice comes from the radio, “Kaz! We need to regroup immediately, regroup at the northern most building we’ll arrive on scene as a full squad.”

“Copy, en route.” Turning to face his team, “You two hear that?”

Still in shock, they continue to look at the cloud of smoke.

“Fuck man, I told you something was gonna happen!” David says in a panicked voice.

Kaz replies, “We don’t know who did that, it could have just been a mistake.”

Madison cuts both of them off, “Either way people are hurt and we need to be there ASAP.”

“Let’s move.”

“Copy, Kaz.”

Walking around the city to the rendezvous point, the team finds that the city is eerily abandoned. While Caz is no longer a large settlement, there was still a large civilian presence. Seeing empty streets while hearing yelling and the sounds of ammunition cooking off from the heat was like being in the eye of a hurricane.

Arriving at the house, Kaz knocks on the door and looks for any suspicious movement. Miller opens the door and gestures Kaz’s team inside.

Closing the door, Miller walks to the group and says, “Local command says the origin was a friendly logistical truck. By all accounts, it seems like sabotage from one of our own. Moments before the truck blew up, some of our guys were seen questioning a suspicious soldier screwing around in the truck. Must’ve been that the bastard didn’t see any way out so he elected to take himself out along with over half of our supplies and at least a dozen good men. It’s unknown if this is an isolated act of sabotage or if it’s a signal to invade while we’re still setting up defenses.”

The distinct sound of a mortar round about to impact interrupts the briefing.

Miller yells, “Everyone down!”

The squad hits the deck as mortars devastate the surrounding infrastructure. Knowing there was no longer a chance for peace, Kaz promised himself he’d live long enough to send a letter back.