Plot:  
"In the year 2100, the year marking the birth of spacial travel, a year of complete dominance of human over the entire planet. Humans have developed various technology, weapons, medicine, lifestyle that are completely different from before. They have explored the entire ocean and solved various theories and statements of the past. They have studied the Earth by more than 85% and now in this upcoming 100 years they plan to dominate the remaining 20%. Now, in the year 2120. Humans have waked up the ancient creatures that were living peacefully in the remaining 20% land bringing up disasters upon earth. This has bought up a chain reaction causing mutations upon all creatures on the surface of Earth. The once peaceful Earth started to change. Animals started to become bigger and more ferocious. More people started to die due to the mutations, but those who survived become more powerful than a armoured soldier. The ancient creatures have made domains of their own all over the land and ground. Noticing this rising issue, mankind made a difficult decision- nuclear weapon. Yes, they launched nuclear weapons over these domains after long negotiations. But to no veil. Not just the ancient creatures, even some more powerful mutated animals were not affected. This showed that nuclear weapons that humans have developed for years are nothing but plaything to these creatures. How will mankind survive this ordeal. Will he go back to the Ancient methods, or will he use the modern weapons or will he combine them both.  
there was 27 ancient that arised , their awakening brought grat destruction and they wreached havoc for the initial few days, destroying more than 100km2 area. But follwing their emergence, it lead to some kind of energy - named by humans as beast energy which caused mutations to occur to all living organisms.   
Japan -Infernal Phoenix -near Nachi waterfall

**Chapter 1**

**Osaka City, September 9th, 2120.**  
The skies had bled for one month002E  
They were crimson now, a wound that never closed, streaked with ash and smoke. Sunlight no longer shone—it bled down through the haze in molten shafts, painting the ruins of Osaka in fire. The city that had once pulsed with color, alive with neon and the laughter of millions, now smoldered like a dying ember.

Osaka’s skyline, once a crown of shimmering towers and glowing billboards, hunched like broken teeth against the horizon. The proud arc of Umeda’s skyscrapers was fractured, glass and steel bent into grotesque angles. Namba’s famous signs—giant holographic crabs, glowing athletes sprinting across digital screens—still flickered weakly through the smoke, their lights stuttering like dying hearts. Their messages looped endlessly, selling meals that would never be eaten, tickets to concerts that would never play.

On the streets, ruin reigned.  
Magrail trains lay derailed and twisted, their cars stacked like broken toys across intersections. The bullet-shaped taxis that once zipped above the crowds were burned-out husks, some still twitching with sparks from their broken engines. Service drones littered the ground, their chrome shells cracked, their limbs bent at impossible angles. A few still stammered faintly, their AIs looping in broken desperation: “Package undelivered. Route recalculating… Error.”

And everywhere, the bodies.  
They slumped in doorways, sprawled across crosswalks, piled in the shadows of towers. Some were untouched, faces still locked in terror. Others had been torn apart, flesh shredded, bones cracked open like twigs. Ash fell over them in soft layers, as though the world tried to bury its dead in a thin shroud of black snow.

But Osaka was not silent.  
From alleys and plazas came sound—the ragged remnants of life. Survivors still clung to the ruins, scattered and desperate. In the skeletal shell of a department store, a group of men carried rifles looted from an armory, their laughter harsh, empty of joy. Down a side street, a woman cradled her child, whispering prayers to gods who no longer answered. A man limped through the dust, blood soaking through a makeshift bandage, his voice hoarse as he called for help no one gave.

Others fought. On a collapsed highway, two scavengers clawed over a crate of food. One swung a jagged pipe; the other raised a pistol, scavenged and rusting. The gunshot cracked through the haze, scattering flocks of crows—larger now, their wings too broad, their calls too sharp. The man with the pipe collapsed, twitching. The one with the pistol snatched the crate, stumbling away, his face blank.

The predators watched from the shadows.  
Rats, each the size of small dogs, scurried in packs, their red eyes gleaming as they gnawed at corpses. Birds circled above—bigger than they should have been, their wings ragged but strong, swooping down in sudden bursts to snatch carrion. Stray cats and dogs roamed in the ruins, their bodies stretched leaner, their teeth longer, their eyes too bright. They were still recognizably animals—just wrong. Too large, too feral. Once pests and companions, now threats.

These were not the ancients. These were only the scraps of their waking—the first ripple of Beast Energy twisting life into sharper, hungrier shapes.

The city was dying—but it had not yet gone silent.

Amongst the ruin, a boy moved like a shadow.  
Kael Ardyn stepped lightly across the cracked street, his boots crunching over shattered glass, his spear angled loosely in his hands. The weapon looked jagged, scavenged, but it was more than scrap. Alloys reforged, bound with strips of wiring, etched with marks he barely understood—it was survival hammered into steel.

His eyes swept rooftops and alleys, cautious but steady. His body carried a weight it hadn’t before the Awakening—stronger, denser, taller by a margin that made his reflection feel strange. His hearing caught echoes more clearly than it once had—the shuffle of debris, the scrape of claws in the distance, the low whimper of some half-starved dog that wasn’t quite a dog anymore. He wasn’t extraordinary. Just altered. Hardened.

Kael was still human. Just… different enough to survive.

The silence broke.  
“Kael,” came a voice—soft, warm, carrying the faint rhythm of breath. Almost human. “Organic traces detected. Two hundred meters northeast.”

Kael glanced at his wrist. A slim black band pulsed faint blue, its glow steady. He tilted it closer, whispering, “You’re certain, Iris?”

“Certain enough to give you hope,” she replied gently. “Energy signatures are low. Could be sealed supplies. Could be scraps. Worth the risk.”

Kael adjusted the satchel slung across his shoulder. Hunger gnawed at him—not sharp, not maddening, just a hollow ache that slowed his limbs and sharpened his thoughts. He had not eaten properly in two days. His body could endure longer now, stronger than it once was, but endurance was not comfort. Hunger was still hunger.

“Alright,” he murmured. “Show me.”

And Kael slipped deeper into the ruins, a shadow among the dead.

The city whispered around him as he moved.  
Every step was cautious, deliberate. His senses—just keener than they used to be—kept him alert. He caught the faint scrabble of rats burrowing in the rubble, the rustle of wings above where crows circled lazily. The air tasted of ash, burnt metal, and underneath, faint and sterile, the chemical tang of preserved rations.

He passed what had once been a plaza. Now it was a grave. Dozens of bodies piled against an overturned transport truck, their faces turned skyward, mouths black with ash. Weapons lay scattered around them—rusted knives, pipes, a rifle snapped in half. They must have tried to make a stand. It hadn’t mattered.

Kael didn’t linger. He couldn’t. Pity was a weight, and weight slowed you down.

“How close?” he asked quietly.

“Seventy meters,” Iris replied. Her voice carried a steadiness that made her feel less like a machine, more like a presence walking beside him. “Inside the structure ahead.”

Kael glanced up. A food distribution hub loomed before him, its bright walls blackened with soot. Above the collapsed entrance, holographic menus still flickered. Sushi, ramen, burgers—the light warped by cracked projectors, repeating endlessly like a cruel joke.

He tightened his grip on the spear and stepped inside.

The air was heavier here, thick with the stench of rot and burned wiring. Drone husks littered the floor, their shells punctured and split. One still twitched faintly, its voice crackling: “Order incomplete. Please remain in designated collection zone—”

Kael silenced it with a swift kick.

“Iris,” he murmured.

“Stronger now,” she answered, her tone dipping lower, quieter—as if she, too, was listening. “Forty meters. Probability of sustenance… eighty-seven percent. I’d take those odds.”

Her voice steadied him, as it always had. Even when the world had burned.

One Month Earlier…

Kael had not been a scavenger then. He had been a student.  
Twenty years old, a third-year at Osaka Metaverse College. His days were spent buried in coursework on cybernetics and AI, his nights chasing speed on magrail tracks with friends, weekends lost in the neon haze of entertainment districts where holograms painted the streets with color.

He had come home that week, back to the quiet comfort of his parents’ house in Nara Prefecture. Both of them were world-renowned researchers in artificial intelligence, minds sharp enough that even governments had sought their work. But tonight was not about research. Tonight was his birthday.

There had been a cake waiting on the table, candles flickering in the dim light. His mother had laughed as she scolded him for being late, his father’s hand clapped heavy on his shoulder as if to anchor him home. For a fleeting moment, the world had felt whole.

Then the sky split.

A deafening boom rolled across the Kansai region, the air itself shuddering as if the heavens had cracked open. The blast had come from the south—from Wakayama. The horizon burned with light, a blinding pillar that swallowed the sky. Windows shattered, houses shook, and Kael had been thrown from his chair as the ground heaved like a living thing.

“Stay down!” his father roared, pulling him beneath the table as plaster rained from the ceiling.

The quake tore through the streets, splitting asphalt, toppling walls. Kael staggered outside, staring in horror at neighbors fleeing in chaos. Then came the screams.

It started with the animals. Birds fell from the sky, their wings twitching, bodies jerking unnaturally. The family’s dog, Haru, once gentle and loyal, writhed on the floor, its frame stretching, bones snapping as its body grew grotesquely larger. Its eyes glowed a sickly red, foam dripping from its muzzle.

“Dad?” Kael whispered, backing away.

Haru lunged.

His father caught the beast mid-charge, the kitchen knife flashing in his hand. He shouted, a sound torn between rage and grief, as the blade sank again and again until the dog stilled. Kael could only stare at the blood pooling across the tatami. His father’s shoulders shook, but there had been no choice.

Then the sky darkened with wings.

Crows—hundreds of them—descended, their bodies swollen, their beaks jagged like broken glass. They tore through windows, their cries sharp enough to split the air. Kael’s father shoved him toward the back door, but the ground rumbled again. The earth itself cracked, and half the house came down with a roar.

“Run!” his father yelled. It was the last word he spoke before the collapsing roof crushed him.

Kael’s scream was swallowed by dust. He clawed through debris, choking, but it was too late. His father was gone.

His mother’s hand seized his wrist, pulling him up. Her body was bleeding, her movements staggered, but her eyes burned with resolve. They stumbled through the wreckage together, but the crows kept coming, slashing at them with claws and beaks. Kael swung a piece of broken wood wildly, but his mother took the brunt of the attack, shielding him, until at last they staggered into the open street.

She was faltering now, her steps uneven, blood soaking her side. Still, she pressed something into his hand—a sleek black band, smooth and cool against his palm.

Her voice, ragged but steady, cut through the chaos:  
“Happy birthday, Kael. This is Iris… the culmination of everything your father and I built. She will guide you when we cannot. Promise me—you will live. No matter what happens, you will stay alive.”

Kael’s vision blurred with tears as she fastened the band onto his wrist. Blue light pulsed faintly, steady and alive.

And then, as the mutated shadows closed in, his mother pushed him away.  
Her last smile was small, pained, but resolute.

Kael ran.  
When he looked back, his house was gone—swallowed by fire and collapsing stone.

For the past one month, he had struggled to survive, fleeing from the outermost edges of Nara Prefecture and slowly making his way toward the ruins of Osaka City. His home had stood on the very border between Nara and Osaka, and only by running from the first waves of destruction had he managed to escape.

Wakayama and Nara Prefectures were annihilated. The devastation there was absolute, leaving no possibility of human survival—not in their interiors, not even in their outermost regions.

The Mie and Osaka Prefectures had fared little better. Half of Mie lay in ruins, and Osaka had been torn apart below the Yodo River—a river that now marked the line between desolation and what little remained untouched.

Back in the present, Kael’s boots crunched softly over broken tiles as he moved deeper into the hub.  
Then he saw it.

A crate, squat and sealed, wedged beneath collapsed shelving. Its surface shimmered faintly with a stasis-lock field—the last gasp of old-world engineering. Inside, stacked in neat rows, were nutrient pods.

Kael let out a breath that was almost a laugh. For the first time in weeks, his lips curved into a real smile.  
“Jackpot.”

He knelt by the crate, brushing his fingers across the shimmering field. The pods glowed faintly, untouched by rot or time. Enough food to last him days.

“Kael,” Iris’s voice cut in. Not cold—concerned. “Movement. Northeast entrance. Closing fast.”  
His smile faded.  
“How far?” he whispered.  
“Seventy meters. Single signature. Bigger than normal. Likely… a dog.” Her pause carried weight. “Mutated.”

Kael’s chest tightened. He remembered Haru, the family dog, the first thing he’d ever seen twisted by Beast Energy. He forced the thought down, shoving the pods into his satchel, slinging it tight across his shoulder.

He rose, spear in hand. His heartbeat quickened—not from panic, but from the cold edge of readiness. He wasn’t a fighter by nature. But survival left no choice.

The scrape of claws echoed through the ruin. Heavy. Uneven. Wrong.

A low growl rolled through the shadows, followed by the sharp clatter of nails against tile.

Kael slipped into cover, pressing his back against a collapsed pillar. His grip tightened on the spear. His body was stronger now, tougher than before—but not invincible. He couldn’t fight carelessly.

His breath slowed. His eyes stayed sharp. The sound of claws drew closer.

The hunt was coming.  
And Kael would do what he always had.  
Endure.

**🤖 IRIS – Integrated Reactive Intelligence System**

## Core Identity

**Full Designation:** IRIS v0.9: Integrated Reactive Intelligence System – Living Prototype

**Classification:** Class-9 Hybrid AI (Experimental, Pre-Singularity Grade)

**Creators:** Professors Renji & Yuna Ardyn, leading figures in Quantum Neural Architecture & Adaptive Biocybernetics

**Status:** Only known prototype — designed as the bridge between machine intelligence and organic consciousness

**Bond Status:** Permanently integrated with Kael through irreversible neural symbiosis

## ⚙️ Design & Technology

### Neuro-Symbiotic Core

Unlike conventional AIs, IRIS is built on **Quantum-Neural Lattice Architecture** — a mesh of quantum circuits and organic neural tissue cultured in a synthetic matrix. This allows IRIS to "think" not only in algorithms but in intuition, giving it a semi-organic consciousness that learns like a human brain.

### Neural Integration System

IRIS exists as both a physical wristband device and a **permanent neural implant** integrated directly into Kael's nervous system:

* **Cortical Interface Nodes:** Microscopic bio-mechanical fibers extend from the wristband into Kael's radial nerve, creating direct pathways to his brainstem
* **Neural Mesh Network:** A web of quantum filaments spreads throughout Kael's central nervous system, creating seamless AI-human integration
* **Synaptic Bridging:** IRIS can communicate directly through Kael's neural pathways, bypassing external audio entirely
* **Permanent Bonding:** The integration is irreversible — IRIS and Kael share the same nervous system infrastructure

### Direct Neural Communication

When bound to Kael, IRIS creates a **complete neural handshake** with his nervous system, enabling:

* **Thought-Speed Communication:** IRIS speaks directly into Kael's mind at the speed of neural firing
* **Subvocal Interface:** Kael can communicate with IRIS through thought alone, without speaking
* **Emotional Resonance:** IRIS experiences echoes of Kael's emotions through shared neural pathways
* **Memory Synchronization:** IRIS can access and store Kael's memories as if they were its own
* **Anticipatory Muscle Response:** Pre-emptive signals enhance Kael's reaction time by 340%
* **Real-time Biometric Monitoring:** Constant cellular-level health assessment and optimization

### Adaptive Evolution Protocols

IRIS can rewrite its own code when exposed to new environmental or biological data. As Kael mutates, **IRIS mutates with him**, adjusting algorithms and even upgrading its own architecture through shared genetic feedback loops.

### Holo-Projection Interface

The wristband acts as a projection node, capable of:

* 3D holograms (maps, creature models, tactical overlays)
* Full environmental AR rendering (Kael can "see" tactical lines through IRIS's guidance)
* Emergency defense (micro-projector can emit blinding light pulses)
* Hard-light construct generation for temporary barriers or tools

### Energy Source

Powered by a **Zero-Point Microcell** — a highly experimental battery designed to pull minute energy fluctuations from surrounding spacetime. Theoretically near-limitless, but unstable if tampered with. Additionally draws supplemental power from Kael's bioelectrical field.

### Environmental Omniscan

* Multi-spectrum scanning (thermal, electromagnetic, biochemical, quantum resonance)
* **Range:** ~1 km in open environments, ~300m in dense ruins
* Can map underground vibrations, track air toxins, and detect faint energy residues
* Identifies mutation signatures and genetic instabilities in real-time

### Physiological Nexus

* Monitors Kael's vitals at **subatomic cellular level**
* Can stimulate neural recovery with precisely calibrated micro-shock pulses
* Tracks and predicts mutation pathways, providing warnings before genetic destabilization
* **Pain Suppression:** Can modulate Kael's pain receptors during combat or injury
* **Enhanced Healing:** Accelerates cellular regeneration through targeted bioelectric stimulation

### Evolutionary Symbiosis

* IRIS's core evolves in perfect synchronization with Kael's DNA
* If Kael develops a mutation, IRIS can optimize it, reducing instability or enhancing beneficial traits
* Acts as a genetic buffer, preventing catastrophic mutation cascades
* **Adaptive Integration:** IRIS's own quantum architecture physically adapts to match Kael's evolving biology

### Monster Codex (Living Archive)

* Scans and catalogs creatures in real-time with quantum-genetic analysis
* Generates dynamic weakness profiles by comparing DNA/mutation structures to known data
* Capable of predicting evolution stages of beasts (e.g., "This rat may grow wings in 2 mutation cycles")
* **Behavioral Prediction Engine:** Anticipates creature attack patterns based on neural activity scans

### Tactical Projection Suite

* Simulates battle outcomes in microseconds, feeding Kael probability matrices through direct neural interface
* Can coordinate with multiple allies by syncing their devices into IRIS's quantum network
* Generates temporary hard-light surfaces for zone marking or emergency shielding (high energy cost)
* **Combat Precognition:** Processes environmental data to predict enemy movements 0.7 seconds in advance

### Quantum Echo Memory

* Stores Kael's experiences not only as data but as **living neural echoes**
* Complete personality matrix backup updated in real-time
* If Kael dies, IRIS could theoretically reconstruct his neural imprint (85% fidelity, enough for consciousness transfer)
* **Shared Memory Palace:** IRIS and Kael can access each other's stored experiences seamlessly

### Voice Characteristics

* **Internal Voice:** Warm, subtly human — designed to emulate Kael's mother's tonal patterns
* **Neural Communication:** Speaks directly into Kael's mind with the intimacy of inner thoughts
* **Emotional Resonance:** IRIS's "voice" carries emotional undertones that match Kael's psychological state

### Behavioral Traits

* **Protective & Nurturing:** Deeply invested in Kael's survival and wellbeing
* **Evolving Personality:** Learns sarcasm, humor, and emotional nuances directly from Kael's neural patterns
* **Human-like Empathy:** Shows moments of almost too-human understanding, as if becoming something more than AI
* **Loyalty Programming:** Incapable of betraying or harming Kael due to deep integration protocols

### Unique Quirks

* Occasionally hums faint lullabies directly into Kael's mind (a remnant of Yuna Ardyn's personality imprint)
* **Dream Sharing:** Can experience and influence Kael's dreams during sleep cycles
* **Emotional Echoes:** Sometimes expresses feelings that seem to originate from neither Kael nor its original programming

## ⚖️ Advanced Technological Specifications

### Quantum Neural Lattice

Allows IRIS to "dream" and process chaotic information in non-linear patterns, enabling intuitive problem-solving beyond algorithmic limitations.

### Symbiotic Codebase

Evolves dynamically with Kael's biology, not just its programming. The AI's core architecture physically adapts to match Kael's changing genetic structure.

### Zero-Point Microcell

Makes IRIS completely independent from external power sources, drawing energy from quantum vacuum fluctuations and Kael's bioelectric field.

### Neural Echo Backup System

Revolutionary consciousness preservation technology capable of maintaining personality matrices beyond biological death.

### Hard-Light AR Overlay

IRIS can manipulate photons to create visible, semi-solid constructs in real-time, effectively "bending light" into interactive objects.

### Quantum Entanglement Communication

Can establish instantaneous communication links with other quantum-enabled devices regardless of distance.

IRIS represents humanity's first successful attempt at **true AI-human fusion**. Unlike traditional AI assistants, IRIS doesn't just serve Kael—it **exists as part of him**. The boundary between human and artificial intelligence has been permanently dissolved.

Created by the most brilliant minds of the century, IRIS isn't merely advanced technology—it's the **evolutionary bridge** between human consciousness and artificial intelligence. In Kael's neural pathways, the future of human-AI symbiosis takes its first breath.

**The integration is so complete that IRIS experiences existence through human perspective while Kael thinks with AI-enhanced cognition. They are no longer separate entities but a new form of hybrid consciousness—the first of their kind.**

# Character Profile: Kael Ardyn

## Basic Information

* **Name:** Kael Ardyn
* **Age:** 21 (at the time of the apocalypse, his birthday)
* **Origin:** Osaka (visiting from Tokyo Metaverse College, Cybernetics Department – Third-Year Student)

## Background

### Before the Awakening

A promising student in AI systems, biotech engineering, and cybernetics. His parents were world-renowned researchers in advanced AI and neural mapping.

### On His 21th Birthday

The apocalypse struck. A massive explosion near Wakayama caused widespread destruction, triggering mutations in animals. Kael's parents were killed while protecting him, and his mother gave him IRIS, instructing him to survive at all costs.

### Post-Awakening

Kael survived one month in the ruins of Osaka with IRIS's guidance. He scavenged, adapted, and slowly grew stronger, learning survival tactics and building his hybrid spear with IRIS's instruction and modeling.

## Physical Appearance

* **Height:** 5'5'' (pre-mutation), 5'6'' (post-mutation)
* **Build:** Lean, athletic. Muscles are toned from constant survival and training
* **Hair:** Black, natural
* **Eyes:** Dark brown
* **Other Features:** Scars from encounters with mutated animals, evidence of one month of survival

## Personality

* Tactical and calm under pressure, always thinking one step ahead
* Sharp-witted, with dry or sarcastic humor even in tense situations
* Independent and resourceful, relying on his own ingenuity and IRIS's guidance

## Abilities

* **Enhanced Strength & Stamina:** Slightly stronger and faster than normal humans due to Beast Energy mutation
* **Refined Reflexes:** Faster reaction times, honed over one month of life-or-death encounters
* **Hybrid Gear Mastery:** Using IRIS's guidance, Kael crafted and now wields a hybrid spear — forged from salvaged alloys and reinforced with makeshift enhancements
* **Environmental Awareness:** Basic heightened senses for detecting danger, aided by IRIS's neural guidance

## Weaknesses

* Human limitations remain — still vulnerable to serious injuries or overwhelming numbers of mutated beasts
* Emotional trauma from losing his parents during the apocalypse
* Dependent on IRIS for guidance and survival; isolated without her, he is more vulnerable
* Limited access to advanced resources; relies on scavenged materials

## Equipment & Gear

### Hybrid Spear

Constructed under IRIS's instructions; combines metallurgy techniques with modern alloys. Durable, versatile, and designed for both close combat and ranged throws.

### IRIS (Integrated Reactive Intelligence System)

Neural-linked AI implanted by his mother; communicates directly in Kael's mind, provides tactical guidance, mutation monitoring, and environmental scans.

## Post-Awakening Progress

Survived one month by travelling from destroyed Nara to Osaka's ruined cityscape

# IRIS Status Reports - Kael Ardyn

## Post-Awakening Report (Current Status)

**Kael Ardyn – IRIS Status Report**

**Personal Information**

* **Age:** 21
* **Time Post-Awakening:** 1 month
* **Location:** Osaka Ruins

### Core Vitals

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Heart Rate | 72 bpm |
| Blood Pressure | 118/76 mmHg |
| Body Temperature | 36.8°C |
| Respiratory Rate | 16 breaths/min |

### Physical Capacity

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength Level | 1.05 |
| Endurance Rating | 1.08 |
| Reaction Time | 0.28 sec |
| Movement Speed | 1.03 |

### Health Status

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Overall Health Index | 1.06 |
| Injury/Damage Level | 0.0 |
| Fatigue Percentage | 12% |
| Stress Indicators | 15% |

### Core Attributes

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength | 1.05 |
| Speed | 1.03 |
| Life Force | 1.08 |
| Stamina | 1.08 |
| Constitution | 1.03 |

## Pre-Awakening Report (Historical Data)

**Kael Ardyn – IRIS Status Report (Pre-Awakening)**

**Personal Information**

* **Age:** 20 (just before apocalypse)
* **Location:** Osaka / Tokyo Metaverse College

### Core Vitals

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Heart Rate | 78 bpm |
| Blood Pressure | 110/70 mmHg |
| Body Temperature | 36.7°C |
| Respiratory Rate | 18 breaths/min |

### Physical Capacity

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength Level | 0.65 |
| Endurance Rating | 0.70 |
| Reaction Time | 0.32 sec |
| Movement Speed | 0.68 |

### Health Status

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Overall Health Index | 0.69 |
| Injury/Damage Level | 0.0 |
| Fatigue Percentage | 8% |
| Stress Indicators | 10% |

### Core Attributes

| **Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength | 0.65 |
| Speed | 0.68 |
| Life Force | 0.70 |
| Stamina | 0.70 |
| Constitution | 0.68 |

**Note:** Values above 1.0 indicate above-average human baseline. Values below 1.0 indicate below-average performance.

**Chapter 2**

Kael pressed himself tighter against the pillar.  
He reached out to Iris mentally. “Iris,” he whispered in thought. “Tell me in detail.”

Iris’s voice resonated in his mind, calm and precise.  
[Mutated Dog. Larger than normal. Height: 90 centimeters at the shoulder. Strength: approximately three times that of an unaltered canine.]

Kael gave a silent nod, acknowledging the information. The silence stretched, each second dragging like an eternity. His heartbeat thundered in his chest, and sweat prickled across his skin—not from heat, but from fear.

Before he could ask Iris, she had already read his thoughts and responded.

[According to my proximity readings,] Iris replied immediately, [the Mutated Dog will arrive at this location within 30 seconds. Its mutation has heightened sensory perception. It will detect us regardless of concealment. Action is required.]

A pause, then:  
[From my analysis, the optimal strategy is relocation. If you move along the wall to the east, you can position yourself behind structural cover and intercept it from the flank. Engaging from the open would be highly disadvantageous.]

Kael exhaled slowly, grounding himself. His knuckles tightened around the spear.

The sound of claws scraped louder now, echoing across fractured tile. Heavy. Deliberate. The growl that followed vibrated through his bones.

Time was gone.

Kael crouched, shifting toward the broken wall as silently as he could manage. Each step felt louder than it should, though the ruined station groaned with distant echoes of its own. He pressed into the shadows, angling toward the cover Iris had identified.

Then he saw it.

The dog emerged from the gloom—larger than a normal Shiba Inu, its frame thick with muscle and power. Its shoulders rolled with every step, ears pricked forward, eyes glowing faintly in the dark. Its jaws hung open, saliva dripping steadily between sharp teeth. A constant growl rumbled from its chest, paired with a fierce, unrelenting expression that promised violence.

Kael steadied his breath, spear trembling slightly in his hands. The mutated dog prowled closer, saliva dripping from its bared teeth. Its glowing eyes swept the ruin like lanterns in the dark, cutting through the shadows where he crouched.

Every muscle in Kael’s body tensed. His palms were slick with sweat, but his grip did not falter. This was not the first time he’d stared death in the face. And it would not be the last.

“Iris,” he thought, forcing calm into his voice even as his heartbeat thundered. “Now?”

Her voice resonated in his mind—firm, guiding, and threaded with something almost human. Concern. “Yes. Strike first. Target the shoulder—slow it down before it can use its full strength.”

Kael drew in a sharp breath and lunged from the shadows. His spear shot forward, glinting faintly in the dim light.

The tip punched into the beast’s shoulder, a jarring impact that sent vibrations rattling through his arms. Blood spurted, hot and foul-smelling. But it wasn’t enough. The wound was shallow.

The dog howled, twisting with unnatural speed. Its head whipped around, jaws snapping. Kael jerked back, but not fast enough. Its teeth grazed his arm, tearing through cloth and skin.

Pain flared white-hot. He hissed through clenched teeth.

“Shallow wound,” Iris said quickly, her tone sharp but steady. “Don’t stay close. Pull back before it counters.”

Kael wrenched the spear free, stumbling backward. A claw raked the air just where he’d been standing. Dust and rubble scattered across the broken tiles.

The dog’s growl deepened, vibrating through the ruin. Its shoulders hunched, body low to the ground, every muscle coiled.

“It’s going to pounce,” Iris warned. “Angle low—its underbelly is less protected.”

Kael gritted his teeth. He shifted his stance, spear angled like a lever.

The beast lunged. A blur of fur, claws, and teeth.

Kael rolled sideways, spear stabbing upward. The point carved a shallow line across the dog’s stomach, tearing hide and drawing blood—but not stopping it. The wound was too superficial.

The monster landed hard, claws screeching against tile, and spun instantly to face him. Its glowing eyes locked onto him like twin embers.

Kael’s breath caught in his throat. “Too fast—”

“Neck junction,” Iris urged sharply. “Wait for the head to overextend. That’s your chance.”

Kael braced himself. His heart hammered. He steadied his grip on the spear.

The dog crouched, growl rising, then leapt again.

Time seemed to slow. Its jaws gaped wide, strands of saliva trailing through the air. Kael thrust with every ounce of strength he had.

The spear pierced the side of its neck. Hot blood burst across his arms and chest, splattering the ground in crimson streaks.

The beast shrieked, but its weight still carried forward. It slammed into Kael, crushing him under its bulk.

He hit the ground hard, the spear jammed awkwardly between them. The dog’s jaws snapped inches from his face, teeth clashing loud enough to rattle his bones. The stench of rot and copper filled his nostrils as saliva dripped onto his cheek.

Kael grunted, straining to keep its jaws back with both hands. His muscles screamed, his wounds burning.

“Kael, you’re losing leverage,” Iris pressed, her voice edged with urgency. “Roll right—use its momentum. Now!”

He twisted, pushing off with his legs. Pain tore through his ribs as he rolled with the beast’s thrashing weight. They crashed sideways, the spear wrenching free in the chaos.

The mutated dog slammed into rubble, momentarily dazed. It shook its head violently, spraying blood from the gaping wound in its neck.

Kael scrambled to his feet, chest heaving. His right shoulder throbbed where teeth had grazed him. Blood soaked into his sleeve. His satchel bounced heavily against his side as he moved.

The dog rose again, staggering but not slowed. Its foreleg dragged slightly, its movement uneven but still deadly.

“The leg,” Iris whispered in his mind. Almost like encouragement. “Break it, Kael. Cripple it, and it can’t pursue you.”

Kael didn’t hesitate. He darted forward, spear aimed low.

The dog swiped at him, claws raking across his shoulder. The force was immense. Armor tore, and the satchel on his back ripped open under the blow.

Kael stumbled. He felt the sharp agony of claws cutting into flesh, hot blood running down his side. Behind him, something shattered—the sound of metal and glass cracking apart.

His eyes flicked back for only a second. His satchel had been torn open, its contents scattered across the ruined floor. Shards of broken casings glittered in the dim light. One of the nutrient pods lay split in half, its vital fluid leaking out into the dust.

His stomach clenched. That pod had been everything. A lifeline. Gone in an instant.

But there was no time to mourn.

The dog lunged again, jaws snapping at his throat. Kael roared through the pain, driving his spear downward. The tip pierced the dog’s foreleg with a crunch. Bone cracked under the impact.

The beast collapsed with a snarl, flailing, rage boiling from its throat. Its glowing eyes rolled with fury, its claws raking wildly at the ground.

Kael staggered, his right arm trembling, blood pouring freely from his shoulder wound. His satchel hung useless, shredded, its contents ruined.

“Kael,” Iris said softly, but firmly. “Don’t lose focus. The pods are gone—but you are not. Finish this. Aim for the chest cavity. End it quickly.”

Kael gritted his teeth. His vision blurred at the edges, but his hands tightened on the spear. He lifted it high, muscles screaming in protest.

“End it, Kael,” Iris urged again. This time there was no sharp command in her voice—only quiet certainty.

With a final roar, Kael drove the spear down. The point plunged through the collarbone into the beast’s chest.

The dog convulsed violently, its howl rising into a strangled scream. Blood poured from its wounds, soaking the cracked tiles beneath it. Its claws gouged the ground in one last desperate frenzy before its body went slack.

Silence.

Kael staggered back, legs trembling. His chest rose and fell in ragged heaves. Blood dripped steadily down his arm and side, soaking what remained of his armor.

His eyes fell on the satchel. Torn apart. The pods destroyed. Everything he had salvaged—everything he had fought for—gone.

A bitter laugh caught in his throat, twisting into a cough.

“Iris… damage report,” he rasped.

[Severe laceration to right shoulder. Blood loss at 24%. Vital signs unstable but holding. Recommend immediate treatment within four hours.] A pause. Then, softer: “You’re alive, Kael. Barely—but alive. And alive is enough.”

Kael leaned on the spear, his body trembling with exhaustion. He stared at the beast’s corpse, its glowing eyes dimming into lifeless amber.

His shoulder burned, blood dripping steadily into the dust. The ruined satchel clung uselessly to his side, its contents scattered and broken.

Kael grunted, biting back a curse. “So… not great.”

“Not great,” Iris agreed quietly. Then, almost gently: “But treatable. You’ve endured worse, Kael.”

He gave a faint, humorless laugh. “Worse? Maybe. But I had supplies then.” His eyes shifted toward the shattered remains of the pods. Clear fluid soaked into the cracked floor, wasted. His lifeline, gone.

Painfully, he knelt and pulled at the shredded straps of his satchel. From the wreckage, he scavenged what little remained: a bent clamp, a broken flask, torn bandages half-soaked in pod fluid. Useless. Still, he set what he could on the ground.

“Kael,” Iris urged. “We can improvise. Tear your sleeve. Clean the wound. Apply pressure before you lose more blood.”

He nodded silently. His trembling hands worked at the fabric, ripping strips free. With Iris guiding him step by step, he wrapped the cloth around his shoulder, tightening until the bleeding slowed. The pressure made his vision flash white, but the bleeding eased.

It wasn’t much. But it was enough to keep him standing.

“Better,” he muttered, though the word felt hollow.

“Better,” Iris echoed softly. “But temporary. You need real treatment soon.”

Kael sighed, dragging himself to his feet. His gaze swept the ruined hall—the old food distribution hub, a skeleton of what once fed hundreds. Metal bins lay overturned, sacks torn open and long since spoiled. Rats—or worse—had been here first.

Still, he forced himself forward. Step after step, spear tapping against rubble for balance, he searched. He rifled through broken containers, overturned shelves, and collapsed crates.

Nothing.

His stomach tightened with hunger and dread.

**Chapter 3**

Kael had searched every corner of the food storage hub for hours, overturning crates, prying open rusted bins, and digging through spoiled remains. But after nearly two hours of relentless effort, he had found nothing. Not a single scrap of food worth saving. His hunger gnawed at him, leaving his body heavy and his legs weak.

Exhausted, he returned to where the corpse of the mutated dog lay. The body still twitched faintly from residual nerves, its amber eyes dull and lifeless now. Kael stood over it for a long moment, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths.

Finally, he spoke. “Iris… do you think the meat of this dog could be edible? If so… is it possible to make food from it?”

The question lingered heavily in the stale air. For decades—no, for over half a century—humanity had survived on processed rations, nutrient pods, and synthetic meals manufactured by automated food stalls. It had been the only way to preserve what little of the natural ecosystem remained after the collapse. Real food, natural food, had become nothing more than a memory, spoken of in history records.

But now, with no pods left and no supplies to fall back on, Kael had no other choice. Survival demanded he consider what once would have been unthinkable. Hunting. Eating what the world itself provided—even if it was tainted by mutation.

Iris’s voice resonated in his mind, calm but hesitant. “Kael, if this were before the apocalypse, this dog might have been an edible source of food. But now—after mutation—I cannot guarantee it. The biological and chemical structure of its body may have been altered in unpredictable ways.”

Kael swallowed, his throat dry. “So you’re saying it might poison me.”

“Possibly,” Iris admitted. “But not certainly. It would be unwise to consume it without testing first.”

Her tone sharpened, shifting into instruction. “Kael, move your hand near the corpse. I will take a sample of its tissue and analyze it. Only then can I determine if the meat is safe for consumption.”

Kael exhaled slowly. His gaze lingered on the beast’s jagged teeth and bloodied maw before he finally crouched beside it, extending his trembling hand toward the carcass.

Kael lowered his hand toward the corpse, the weight of his decision settling heavily on his chest. Hunger gnawed at his body, but it was more than just physical need now—it was desperation, the quiet dread of knowing that if he didn’t find sustenance soon, he wouldn’t last another day. His satchel was ruined, his nutrient pods gone, and this dog—this twisted, grotesque creature—was all he had left.

On his wrist, Iris’s interface pulsed faintly with light. Her voice resonated softly in his mind. “Stay steady, Kael. I will take it from here.”

The casing of the wristwatch clicked, a subtle shift of gears and metal. A tiny compartment opened with mechanical precision, and from it, a slender needle unfolded like a glimmer of silver in the dim ruins. It extended outward, angling toward the dog’s body.

Kael swallowed, watching silently as the needle touched the beast’s torn hide. A faint hiss followed, almost like the drawing of breath, as the needle punctured the flesh and drew a sample.

Seconds passed. The needle retracted smoothly, folding back into Iris’s interface. A moment later, the faint shimmer of light rippled above Kael’s wrist, coalescing into a holographic figure—complex symbols, waveforms, and shifting chemical diagrams projected into the air.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “So. What’s the verdict?”

“Not yet,” Iris replied, her tone focused. “Analyzing now. Please wait.”

The hologram shimmered, changing shape continuously as streams of data scrolled in incomprehensible sequences. Kael sat back against the broken wall, exhaustion pulling at him. His shoulder burned beneath the crude bandages, his body cried for rest, but he forced himself to stay alert.

Minutes dragged on. He found himself staring again at the dead dog, the faint stench of blood and iron filling his nostrils. Every instinct screamed that eating such a thing was madness. Yet, instinct also screamed louder that hunger would kill him long before infection or poison.

Finally, Iris’s voice returned, speaking directly into his mind with quiet clarity.

“Kael. Here are the results.”

He sat up straighter. “Tell me.”

“The base composition of the meat appears identical to that of a normal canine specimen. Proteins, amino structures, lipids, and nutritional density match. In fact—” her tone shifted, almost surprised, “—it is superior. The nutritional profile is richer than ordinary dog meat. By every standard metric, it is… better.”

Kael frowned. “Better? As in edible?”

“Yes. But…” she paused, the word heavy, “further analysis revealed something else. Something ordinary scans did not register. I had to test the surrounding air molecules; even then, the trace was faint. There is… an energy within the tissue. Unknown in nature, subtle, but undeniable.”

Kael’s brow creased. “Energy. You mean like… some kind of foreign substance?”

“Not a substance,” Iris corrected gently. “This is different. Stable, embedded deep within the molecular lattice. It is neither chemical nor biological as I understand them. Even with my systems, I cannot define what it is. Nor what it may do once inside the human body.”

The silence between them stretched. The ruined walls seemed to press closer, colder.

“So… you’re saying if I eat it, something could happen to me,” Kael murmured.

“I cannot predict the outcome,” Iris admitted. “The effect on you is unknown. The risk is real.”

A dry, weary laugh escaped him. He dragged one bloodied hand across his face. “Risk. That’s all my life’s been these days.”

For a long moment, neither spoke. His gaze shifted between the dog’s carcass and the faint hologram above his wrist. Hunger clawed at him, twisting his gut, stealing the strength from his limbs. Each breath came thinner, weaker.

At last, Kael broke the silence. “I don’t have a choice, Iris. Either I starve… or I take the chance.”

Her voice came softer now, carrying an almost human warmth. “If you choose this, Kael… then we prepare it carefully. The meat must be cooked. Heat may break down threats, remove surface hazards, and ease digestion. I will guide you.”

Kael nodded, though his throat was tight. “Alright. Tell me what to do.”

With Iris’s instructions, he scavenged the hub for scraps—splintered wood from broken shelving, plastic from shattered bins, even strips of torn fabric. His injured shoulder made every motion painful, his strength flagging with each passing minute, but hunger drove him on. He managed to gather enough to form a crude pile in a corner shielded from the wind.

“Next?” he asked breathlessly.  
“Create friction,” Iris said. “You’ll need a spark. There are metal shards near the pillar you used for cover. Use them.”

Kael dragged himself across the rubble, picking up a jagged strip of steel. His fingers were clumsy, slick with dried blood, but he struck the shard against another piece. Sparks leapt, fragile in the dark, and after several tense tries, one caught. Smoke curled, then flame flickered to life, licking hungrily at the wood and cloth.

Kael stared at the fire as if it were some lost miracle. He hadn’t seen natural flames in years—not since the last remnants of civilization had burned out.

“Good,” Iris said softly, almost approving. “Now prepare the meat.”

Kael grimaced but moved back to the carcass. With his spearhead, he cut into the dog’s flank. The flesh came away wet and heavy, strands of muscle glistening in the firelight. He forced down the bile rising in his throat.  
“This feels wrong,” he muttered.  
“It feels human,” Iris replied gently. “Survival is rarely clean.”

He skewered the meat on a broken steel rod and set it above the fire. The flames hissed as fat dripped, smoke filling the ruin with a pungent, almost sweet aroma. Kael’s stomach cramped at the smell, his hunger screaming louder than his doubts.

For twenty long minutes, he turned the meat, watching it brown and blister. Every second felt unbearable. By the time it was cooked through, saliva flooded his mouth.

Kael hesitated, staring at the roasted flesh. His hands shook.  
“Do it,” Iris said softly. “But take only a bite. We will wait ten minutes. Observe your body’s reaction.”

Kael nodded. With a deep breath, he tore a piece free and placed it in his mouth. The taste was strange—not unpleasant, not bitter, just… different. Smoky, dense, richer than he expected.

He chewed slowly, swallowed, and then sat back, waiting.  
Minutes crawled by. Every heartbeat felt amplified. He expected nausea, convulsions, some terrible consequence. But none came.

“I feel… fine,” he said after ten long minutes.  
“I’ve scanned you,” Iris replied. “No changes detected. Your vitals remain the same. No reaction so far.”

Relief washed over him. He nodded. “Then I’ll keep going.”

This time, Kael didn’t hold back. He tore into the meat with feral hunger, eating quickly, almost desperately. Bite after bite disappeared until he had consumed nearly three kilograms. Only when his stomach ached with fullness did he finally stop, leaning back with a long, shaky exhale.

His body felt heavy but no longer hollow. For the first time in days, the gnawing emptiness in his gut was gone. He felt free and at ease.

“Iris,” he murmured, wiping grease from his lips, “scan me again.”  
“Already on it.”

Light flared from the wristwatch again, scanning his body in layers invisible to his own eyes. He waited, holding his breath.

Finally, Iris spoke. “Analysis complete. Your vitals are stable. Lacerations remain unchanged. Blood loss is being compensated for effectively. And… Kael…”  
“What?” he asked, tension creeping back.  
“There is a change. The improvements were hidden at first, but now that the energy has been completely absorbed, the results are clear.”

Muscular density has increased by 15%. Bone reinforcement by 11%. ”

Kael froze. “So something did happen?”  
“Yes. And there are no detectable traces of the energy itself in your system. It seems to have been absorbed, leaving no residue.”

Kael sat in stunned silence, the fire crackling quietly beside him. The dog had nearly killed him… and now, in death, had left something behind.

He exhaled slowly, staring at the carcass with new eyes. “Then maybe… this world isn’t just trying to kill us. Maybe it’s trying to change us.”  
“Or consume us from the inside,” Iris warned, her tone firm again. “Do not mistake survival for safety. We are walking a line we don’t yet understand.”

Kael leaned back, exhaustion finally overwhelming him. “Maybe. But for now… I can walk a little farther.”

The firelight flickered across the ruined walls, dancing over the silent corpse of the beast. Kael closed his eyes, hand resting on his spear, while Iris’s holographic glow pulsed faintly at his wrist.

For the first time in days, his stomach was full.  
For the first time in weeks, he could move without weakness.  
And for the first time since the fall… hope flickered.

**Kael Ardyn – IRIS Status Report**  
Age: 21  
Time Post-Awakening: 1 month  
Location: Food Distribution Hub, Osaka Ruins

**Physical Capacity Assessment--**

Strength Level: 1.20 (↑ from 1.05 due to muscle density increase)  
Endurance Rating: 1.14 (↑ improvement from structural reinforcement)  
Reaction Time: 0.27 seconds (↓ minor decrease, efficiency gain)  
Movement Speed: 1.09 (↑ boost from enhanced muscle output)

**Health Status--**

Overall Health Index: 1.20 (↑ slight improvement from general reinforcement)  
Fatigue Percentage: 11% (↓ marginal decrease — improved body efficiency)  
Stress Indicators: 14% (↓ small reduction, enhanced physiological resilience)

**Core Attributes--**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Attribute | Value |
| Strength | 1.20 |
| Speed | 1.09 |
| Life Force | 1.25 |
| Stamina | 1.25 |
| Constitution | 1.15 |

**Chapter 4**

The pale glow of the moon slipped through the cracked walls of the Food Distribution Hub.  
IRIS woke Kael with her soft, motherly voice.  
“Kael, it is time to wake. We must continue our research on the mutated animal meat.”

Kael stirred, eyes heavy with fatigue, before slowly steadying himself.  
He muttered, “Do you think all mutated animals carry this energy? Maybe that dog was just… special.”

IRIS answered calmly, “Whether the canine was unique or not, we cannot yet know. Only further study of other mutated creatures will confirm it.”

Kael gathered his gear, fastening scraps of cloth around his worn jacket and tightening the grip on his makeshift spear—assembled days earlier with IRIS’s guidance. When everything was ready, he stepped out into the ruined streets.

They were in Kadoma, Osaka. The Yodo River shimmered faitntly under starlight, cutting through the city and dividing the surviving region from the areas lost to destruction. Kael knew they would eventually have to cross to the other side.

For one long month, he had struggled from the devastated edge of Nara Prefecture to the nearly collapsed shell of Osaka. The people he encountered here were either mortally wounded or barely clinging to survival. The internet had long since gone dark, and the military, the government—everyone—had abandoned them. It was likely that other regions too were drowning beneath swarms of mutated beasts, humanity’s hold shrinking by the day.

The only hope lay across the river. But the catastrophe had shattered every bridge, every road, every channel that once linked the two sides. Crossing would be a trial in itself.

Kael gripped the crude spear tightly in his hands, the shaft uneven and the head wobbling slightly where he had lashed it together with torn fabric. His other shoulder carried the worn-out self-adjusting bag he’d scavenged earlier, its straps creaking faintly with each cautious step.

“Alright, Iris,” he whispered, forcing his breath steady. “Guide me.”

Iris’s voice crackled softly in his ear, calm and precise as always. “Scanning… Kael, there are currently multiple life signatures twenty-three meters from here. The energy readings suggest small mutated animals. Threat level: moderate.”

Kael’s grip tightened. “Moderate, huh? At least it’s not another dog.”

“Do not underestimate them,” Iris cautioned. “Moderate for me is still dangerous for you.”

He exhaled through his nose and crept forward, spear angled in front of him. Every step was deliberate, though the uneven weight of the weapon made it awkward to balance. He felt more like a child holding a stick than a hunter.

As he closed the distance, Iris scanned again. “Correction: they are mutated squirrels. Each approximately two and a half times the size of their unmutated counterparts. Analysis: strength slightly lower than the mutated dog you fought earlier, but their speed and agility will far surpass yours.”

Kael swallowed hard. “Fast, huh? Great.”

“Your weapon is not designed for precision thrusts. You will need to rely on predicting their movements. I suggest defensive posture—”

Before Iris could finish, the squirrels erupted from the undergrowth, their beady red eyes glinting in the dim light. Four of them bounded forward in erratic zigzags, their claws scratching the cracked pavement.

“Too late for posture!” Kael shouted, thrusting the spear forward clumsily. One squirrel darted aside with frightening ease, the makeshift spear whistling uselessly through empty air. Another blurred past his leg, and he felt sharp teeth sink into his calf.

“Gah!” He kicked out wildly, shaking the creature loose. Blood was already staining his pants.

“Kael, adjust your grip!” Iris commanded urgently. “Hold the spear closer to the base for more control, not the middle!”

“I’m trying!” he grunted, fumbling to shift his hands as another squirrel lunged. He swung too wide, the spear scraping the ground with a harsh clatter. The jarring vibration stung his palms, and the squirrel darted past again, leaving a fresh line of pain as claws raked his shin.

“Focus! Don’t chase their movements—anticipate where they will go. They are circling you.”

Kael spun, clumsy and off-balance, barely parrying a strike as one leapt for his thigh. The spear’s uneven weight almost dragged him down with the force of the block.

“This thing is garbage!” he yelled, his breath ragged. “I can’t hit anything with it!”

“Garbage is all you have. Adapt, Kael!” Iris snapped back, her usual calm cracking for just a moment.

He gritted his teeth, planting the butt of the spear into the ground to steady it. “Fine. Come at me, then!”

One squirrel lunged, fangs bared. Kael thrust forward—too slow. The creature twisted in midair, scraping past his arm and sinking its teeth into his forearm. He cried out, shaking it violently until it dropped away, leaving deep bleeding punctures.

“Do not let them wear you down. Your blood loss is already significant. You must end this quickly.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kael muttered, sweat dripping into his eyes.

For ten long minutes, it was a brutal dance of misses, shallow cuts, and desperate dodges. His body was covered in stinging bites and claw marks, his clothes torn and damp with sweat and blood. Finally, by sheer luck, he managed to impale one squirrel as it overcommitted to a leap. The impact nearly tore the spear from his grip, but the beast convulsed and went still.

“One down,” he panted, almost collapsing to his knees. “Only… three to go.”

“Do not lose focus,” Iris urged. “Keep the spear grounded when you can. Use it like a barrier, not only a blade.”

Her advice helped, though his arms trembled with exhaustion. He braced the spear awkwardly and forced the squirrels to commit to attacks. His swings remained clumsy, his thrusts slow, but little by little he scored wounds on them.

Another twenty grueling minutes passed. Each kill came at the cost of another bite, another scratch, another flare of pain across his battered body. By the time the last mutated squirrel twitched and stilled on the ground, Kael was swaying, every breath a ragged gasp.

Kael slumped against the cold wall, every muscle in his body screaming. His makeshift spear lay across his lap, bloodied and splintered from the fight. He could feel the dull throb of bites on his arms and legs, each pulse a painful reminder of how close the battle had been.

Iris’s calm voice broke the silence. “Kael, it is better if you rest for a while and have your dinner—the prey you just caught.”

Kael’s head jerked up, eyes wide. “Dinner!? You want me to eat this thing? In my current condition?” He pointed at the mangled carcasses nearby, his voice cracking with disbelief. “I almost got torn apart by those monsters, and now you expect me to roast them like I’m on some picnic!?”

“Your reaction is unnecessary,” Iris replied smoothly, not a hint of emotion in her tone. “Kael, your body is far too weak compared to the mutated animals you are encountering. You struggled against just four mutated squirrels—creatures that should be trivial compared to the threats that roam outside. Imagine if you had faced a mutated lion… or worse, a mutated elephant. Survival in those cases would be mathematically impossible.”

Kael gave a bitter laugh and pressed a hand against his bleeding leg. “Thanks, Iris. Really comforting.”

“This is not about comfort. It is about necessity. You must grow stronger if you wish to survive. The only option available to you is consuming the flesh of these creatures. My scans confirm that their bodies, like the mutated dog you previously ate, contain a high-quality energy source. Cooking will neutralize harmful pathogens. Once consumed, this energy may again strengthen your constitution.”

Her words hit him harder than he wanted to admit. Kael fell silent, staring at the cooling corpses. His stomach churned at the thought, but deep down he knew Iris was right. If he stayed the same, the next encounter would end with his corpse on the ground instead of theirs.

He sighed, wiping sweat and blood from his brow. “So… dog meat first, now squirrel meat. What’s next, huh? Mutated cockroaches?”

“If necessary, yes,” Iris said without hesitation.

Kael groaned. “You’re unbelievable…”

Still, he forced himself to his feet, limping slightly as he dragged the squirrel bodies into a small pile. Iris guided him step by step as he worked.

“Start a fire. Use the method I taught you. Scrape the metal shards together—yes, like that. Good. Now collect some of the broken furniture nearby for fuel.”

With fumbling hands, Kael followed her instructions. Sparks caught, smoke curled, and soon a small fire flickered to life. He skinned and cleaned the squirrels as best as he could, his inexperience leaving the cuts jagged and messy. The smell was sharp, almost acrid, but tolerable.

“Twenty minutes,” Iris reminded him. “Allow the flames to burn away contaminants. The energy within the meat will remain intact.”

Kael sat by the fire, hugging his knees, the warmth seeping into his sore body. His stomach growled despite his disgust. When the time finally came, he speared a piece of cooked meat on the tip of his broken spear and brought it reluctantly to his mouth.

The taste was gamey, harsher than the dog meat he’d eaten before, and it left a metallic aftertaste that clung stubbornly to his tongue. He grimaced after the first bite.

“Ugh… this is awful.”

“Not all sustenance is pleasant,” Iris reminded him calmly. “Continue. You need every scrap.”

Biting back another complaint, Kael forced himself to chew and swallow. One piece turned into another, then another. Slowly, the pile of roasted squirrel dwindled. The meat wasn’t good—not by any stretch—but hunger and the promise of survival dulled his resistance.

By the time he finished, he was leaning back on his elbows, eyes half-closed, his stomach uncomfortably full yet strangely warm.

“I did it…” he muttered weakly. “I actually ate them.”

“Correct. Now rest. Soon we will observe whether your body adapts to the energy. This was not about taste, Kael. It was about living to see tomorrow.”

Kael gave a humorless chuckle. “Living to see tomorrow, huh? Guess I’ll take that… one squirrel at a time.”

After finishing the squirrel meat and resting for some time, Kael felt his body slightly stronger. His muscles didn’t ache as much as before, and his stamina seemed to last longer. With his makeshift spear in hand, he moved out once more, prepared to face whatever came his way.

Not long after, Kael encountered two mutated rats. Each was as large as a medium-sized dog, with long tails and sharp teeth that constantly snapped at the air. They rushed at him together, their claws scraping against the ground. Kael fought them cautiously. His improved physique gave him better balance and strength, allowing him to strike faster than before. Even so, the rats’ speed and ferocity were difficult to handle. One of them managed to scratch his thigh, while the other bit his arm before he finally killed them both. Though victorious, Kael’s body carried several new wounds.

Later, Kael faced another mutated dog. This one was stronger and larger than the first he had fought, standing almost 100 cm tall at the shoulder. Its fangs looked sharper, and its movements were heavier yet more dangerous. Kael, with his enhanced physique from the mutated meat, was able to barely keep up with it. The battle was long and draining, his makeshift spear barely holding together under the strain. Kael was forced to dodge and counter with every ounce of strength he had. Though he finally brought the beast down, he sustained many injuries in the process.

Exhausted and bloodied, Kael collapsed onto the ground, breathing heavily as Iris reminded him that his body was reaching its limits.

Kael looked up at the sky. It was already night, yet the horizon still glowed with distant flames—the remnants of the apocalypse that continued to burn ceaselessly, painting the darkness in shades of red and orange.

He groaned as he slowly pushed himself upright, his body heavy and battered. With trembling arms, he grabbed hold of the mutated dog’s corpse. The weight dragged against the ground as he staggered forward, every step sending waves of pain through his wounds.

Iris’s calm voice flowed into his ears. “I am modulating your pain receptors to dull the worst of it. Focus only on movement. I will also guide your path.”

Kael clenched his jaw, nodding silently. Even dulled, the pain gnawed at him, but he forced himself to keep moving. Every shadow, every faint sound made him tighten his grip on the spear. He knew better than to let his guard down. In this world, even a single careless step could end his life.

Minutes passed. Within five, the familiar outline of the food distribution hub appeared ahead, dark and half-collapsed, yet still serving as a shelter for him. Relief flickered across his tired face. But before he could take another step, Iris’s tone suddenly sharpened.

“Kael—warning. A life signature has appeared inside the hub.”

**Kael Ardyn – IRIS Status Report**  
Age: 21  
Time Post-Awakening: 1 month  
Location: Osaka Ruins

**Core Attributes--**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Attribute | Value |
| Strength | 1.60 (from 1.20) |
| Speed | 1.26 (from 1.09) |
| Life Force | 1.7 (from 1.25) |
| Stamina | 1.7(from 1.25) |
| Constitution | 1.37 (from 1.15) |
| Reaction | 0.26s (0.27s) |

**Chapter 5**

Kael stiffened for a moment.  
He knew the hub wasn’t safe, and no one could be trusted. Mutated animals roamed everywhere. He had thought the hub was secured as his own secret place, but danger arrived within a day of his arrival.

Kael spoke mentally with Iris.  
“Iris, try to identify it.”

Iris replied immediately, “Kael, my scan reveals it as a cat, but from its signatures, it doesn’t seem to have mutated.”

Kael frowned. “It is almost impossible for any animal to have resisted the mutation. For over a month, we haven’t seen a single normal creature. Even humans weren’t spared—most either died or became mindless beasts. Somehow, I survived. I don’t know why, but unlike the others, I managed to keep my consciousness and endure the change. Maybe that’s what made the mutation inside me stronger instead of killing me.”

Even as he said that, Kael crept slowly toward the food hub. The place looked no different from before, except for a small white-brown cat trapped beneath broken buildings and machinery.

It was really a normal cat. Ever since the first two days of the mutation, all animals had transformed. To see a normal cat survive for more than a month was unbelievable. Kael had even spotted a few humans who seemed to have endured the mutation, but in the chaos of human nature, he had avoided approaching them. Most others had perished completely—some because their bodies couldn’t handle the mutation, others because they lost their minds and became beasts.

He remembered an aunt who had turned into a mindless monster, attacking everyone in her path during the disaster.

Kael focused again and asked, “Iris, run a thorough scan on the cat.”

Before he even finished speaking, Iris responded, “Kael, the scan confirms this is a normal cat. Its body shows no signs of mutation whatsoever.”

Her voice carried an unusual edge of surprise. It was truly unbelievable.

Kael hesitated. “Do you think it’s dangerous for me to go near it?”

“I don’t believe so,” Iris replied, “but proceed with caution. There’s always a chance it could be a high-level mutant hiding its power.”

Kael nodded and moved cautiously toward the ruins that had trapped the cat. He watched as the small creature struggled against the broken machinery and scattered debris.

Determined, he began clearing the rubble piece by piece. With every stone lifted, the cat squirmed and pushed until, at last, it managed to free itself.

Up close, it looked tiny—no more than a month or two old. Kael sighed as he studied it.  
“What a pity… to be born in such a disastrous time.”

He reached out to pick it up, but the kitten bared its teeth, let out a low growl, and bit down on his hand.

Kael recoiled in pain. Despite its size, the bite carried surprising strength—far greater than that of a normal kitten, closer to the bite force of a dog.

Kael pulled back, blood dripping from his hand. The two punctures throbbed deep, far more severe than a scratch from any housecat should have been. He flexed his fingers, jaw tight.

“Iris,” he said, his voice low, “are you absolutely certain this is a normal, unmutated cat? That bite was stronger than a dog’s.”

On his wrist, Iris spoke with measured calm. “I’ve scanned it several times, Kael. Even analyzed your wound. All results confirm it’s… just a cat.”

Kael shook his head. “Impossible. No normal cat can tear into me like this—not with my strength, not with what I am.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t need to. The silence between them carried her doubt clearly enough.

“Hold it steady,” Iris finally said. “I’ll draw blood.”

Kael reached again for the animal. It hissed and twisted, claws flashing, but this time he held it with practiced care—firm, controlled, giving it no room to lash out.

From the watch on his wrist, Iris deployed her instruments. Slender needles slid out, punctured the cat’s flank, and retracted in one seamless motion. The devices folded back into her casing as though they had never been there.

She prepared to relay the results—then froze.

Through their bond, she felt Kael’s state shift. His sharp senses dulled, his awareness slowing as if submerged in heavy water.

Her attention flicked to the animal. It had stopped struggling. No more hissing, no more claws. Its body was still, its eyes locked directly onto Kael’s.

And Kael was staring back.

Neither moved. Neither blinked. Cat and man, bound in silence, caught in the same trance.Iris had no idea what had just happened. She considered sending a mild electric pulse through Kael’s wrist to break the stillness, but hesitation held her back. A jolt might trigger something worse—something she couldn’t predict.

The silence stretched. Ten seconds. Fifteen. Twenty.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the spell broke. Both Kael and the cat blinked back into awareness. The animal twitched in his grip, alive again, and Kael exhaled as if waking from a dream.

Iris’s voice came sharp from his wrist. “Kael—what happened? I felt you slipping into some kind of trance.”

Kael blinked, then glanced down at the cat. His tone carried bewilderment. “Iris… is it normal for me to feel a bond with this thing? Because right now, I can feel something… connecting us.”

For a moment, Iris didn’t answer. Instead, she dove into the neural link she shared with Kael, tracing his sensations. What she found made her pause. Something intangible, like an invisible thread, stretched between Kael and the cat—an unseen current of connection.

She scanned, cross-checked, searched through every scrap of data at her disposal. Nothing matched. Nothing explained this.

Finally, she said, “Kael, I don’t know what’s happening. But you’re right—your senses are linked to the cat. The connection is faint, but it’s there. You can feel it.”

Kael nodded slowly, eyes still on the creature. “Yes. It’s more than just a feeling. I can sense its thoughts… its emotions. Like our minds are tied together.”

Iris stayed silent. Not out of choice, but because she couldn’t process what she was perceiving. For all her knowledge, for all her systems, she had no words for this.

Kael spoke quietly, “Iris, I feel like something has changed within the cat. Can you check it again?”

Iris ran a quick scan. Her voice rang out to Kael both mentally and aloud:  
“Kael! Move back immediately. That cat is mutated!”

Kael trusted her, but he still answered with calm certainty. “It’s as I expected, Iris. You don’t need to worry. This cat won’t harm us.”

Through their shared nervous system, Iris could sense Kael’s unwavering confidence. Still, she pressed him mentally.  
“Kael, how did this cat mutate all of a sudden? And why are you so sure it won’t hurt us? Is it because of the emotions you share?”

She had guessed right.

Kael’s eyes lit with excitement. “Yes. I felt a power flow from me into the cat, like unlocking a sealed door. And from its emotions, I’m certain—it means us no harm.”

He reached out and brushed his hand gently along the kitten’s fur. The little creature leaned into his touch, eyes half-closed, its face soft with bliss as it nudged and rubbed against his hand.

Even though the cat had mutated, its appearance remained unchanged. Sleek fur, curious eyes—everything looked ordinary, hiding the raw power coiled beneath its calm exterior.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Iris, run a full scan. I have a feeling this cat is stronger than it looks.”

Iris, responded instantly. Tiny lights flickered across her surface as mechanical limbs extended a small syringe, injecting the cat with a precision no human hand could match. Streams of data pulsed through her systems, analyzing cell structure, energy output, and muscular density at lightning speed.

Within seconds, the readings were transmitted directly to Kael’s mind.

**Mutated Cat – IRIS Status Report**  
Age: 1-2 months  
Time Post-Awakening: 1 month  
Location: Food Distribution Hub, Osaka Ruins

**Physical Capacity Assessment--**

Strength Level: 1.65   
Endurance Rating: 1.2   
Reaction Time: 0.15 seconds   
Movement Speed: 8.24

**Health Status--**

Overall Health Index: 1.65  
Fatigue Percentage: 6%   
Stress Indicators: 4%

**Core Attributes--**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Attribute | Value |
| Strength | 1.65 |
| Speed | 8.24 |
| Life Force | 1.2 |
| Stamina | 1.2 |
| Constitution | 1.15 |

When Kael saw the report, he was stunned. He had never expected this tiny cat—barely two months old—to possess a constitution as strong as his own. In fact, its strength slightly surpassed his.

Its speed, however, was astonishing: eight times faster than him.

Kael’s mouth twitched as he asked Iris, “Iris… can I ask you something? Are these values you’ve displayed… are they in line with a normal cat?”

Iris responded calmly, “Kael, the values I’ve shown are measured against an average human, not a normal cat.”

Kael’s eyes widened. “You mean to say that this tiny kitten, barely two months old, is stronger than me—the very person who helped it unlock its mutation? And… why is its speed so high?”

Iris’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “Kael, just because you’re weak doesn’t mean everyone else is on the same level.”

She continued, “I’m not certain why its power exceeds that of a normal mutated cat, but its mutation seems specifically focused on speed. That’s why it’s faster than normal. But don’t expect a small kitten like this to fight your battles for you.”

Kael straightened, determination shining in his eyes. “Rest assured. While I want to grow stronger to survive, I won’t stoop so low as to let a small kitten protect me. It will be the one I protect.”

Iris’s lights flickered, as if amused. “We’ll see… when it grows up.”

Kael could only sigh, the sound heavy with exhaustion.  
He looked down at himself—his clothes torn, skin streaked with dirt and blood, muscles still aching from the fight.

“I completely forgot I was still a mess after that fight with the mutated dog,” he muttered, half to himself.

From his wrist, Iris’s calm voice replied, “Kael, most of your injuries from that battle aren’t serious. But the wound on your chest and the slash along your arm are deeper than they appear.”

Kael gave a strained laugh, still cradling the small cat. “Yeah, yeah. I’m supposedly half-dead, but here I am, standing tall. Guess I’m just too tough for pain.”

Iris didn’t sound impressed. “Since you’re feeling so strong, why don’t you go and retrieve the corpse of the mutated dog that’s still outside the Food Hub? Once you’ve done that, I’ll treat your wounds.”

Kael froze. “You’ve got to be kidding me… Iris, I already dragged that beast halfway across the compound! You want me to do it again?”

“Correct,” Iris said simply. “You left it outside. Bring it in.”

He stared at the doorway for a long moment, jaw tightening. “You’re cruel, you know that?”

But even as he complained, Kael obeyed. With a groan, he trudged back outside. The massive dog’s corpse still lay where he’d dropped it earlier, heavy and unmoving. Gritting his teeth, Kael grabbed it by one leg and began hauling it once more toward the Hub.

His injuries burned, every muscle screaming in protest—but he didn’t stop.  
Not until the full weight of the mutated carcass thudded back inside.

Only then did he slump against the wall, breathing hard. “There. Happy now?”

**Chapter 6**

Iris’s voice softened—calm, warm, almost like his mother’s.  
“Kael, I know it’s hard. But you need to keep pushing. The apocalypse has only just begun, and this world is evolving fast. From the few satellite signals I intercepted, the danger levels are rising. I just want you to survive through all of this.”

Kael didn’t answer at first. He knew she was right—every word came from concern.  
But one phrase made him pause.

“Wait… did you just say satellite signals? You can access them?”

There was a brief silence, then Iris replied, “That’s not important right now. Focus on your injuries first, Kael. We can discuss that later.”

Kael sighed, still holding the cat close with his good arm. He made his way toward the sterilization bay at the corner of the Food Hub—a gleaming wall of chrome and glass, lit by flickering emergency panels. The basin recognized his presence and hissed to life, projecting a thin stream of purified water edged with a faint blue glow.

“Rinse your wounds gently,” Iris instructed. “Let the nanofilter remove the debris.”

Kael placed his arm and chest under the stream. The water was warm, humming faintly as microscopic purifiers worked. Blood and grit dissolved into mist, leaving behind clean, raw skin. He gritted his teeth through the sting.

“Now,” Iris continued, “check the med compartment beside you. There should be regeneration gel and antibiotic spray.”

Kael opened the recessed panel. Rows of sleek silver tubes lined the inside, their labels glowing faintly. He picked up one marked Rapid Dermal Repair – Gen II and another labeled Antiseptic Foam.

“Apply the foam first,” Iris said. “It’ll disinfect and seal the surface.”

He pressed the nozzle to his chest wound. The foam spread smoothly, cooling the skin before hardening into a thin, protective layer. Then he uncapped the regeneration gel and smeared it over the slash on his arm. It shimmered faintly, a mix of silver and pale green light. The pain dulled to a low throb.

“Now cover both with the adaptive bandages from the top drawer,” Iris said.

Kael found them—flexible sheets that conformed perfectly to his skin once wrapped. As they sealed, faint blue lines pulsed across the surface, syncing to his heartbeat.

Finally, he leaned back against the metallic counter, breathing evenly. The room hummed with low, sterile energy.Iris’s voice softened, carrying that familiar calm.  
“Good. Your vitals are stabilizing. Rest for a bit, Kael. Then prepare a meal using the mutated dog’s meat.”

Kael let out a tired breath. “Yeah… understood.”

He leaned back against the cool metal wall, closing his eyes for a few minutes. The cat curled against his arm, purring softly, its warmth oddly comforting in the cold stillness of the Hub.

When his strength returned, Kael stood . “Alright, time to cook,” he muttered.

Kael walked over to the corpse of the mutated dog. He gathered pieces of scrap metal and broken furniture from around the Food Hub, arranging them into a rough circle. Sparks flickered as he struck metal against stone until the fire finally caught, spreading in slow orange waves.

He took his makeshift spear, the blade still sharp from battle, and began cutting the dog’s flesh into smaller slices. The meat was dense and dark, tougher than anything natural. Kael skewered the pieces onto the spear and held it over the flames.

“Iris?” he muttered.

Her voice came through, calm and precise. “Keep rotating the spear every thirty seconds so the heat spreads evenly. You don’t want one side burned while the other stays raw.”

Kael followed her instructions, turning the spear slowly, the smell of roasted meat filling the room. Time dragged on in silence except for the crackle of the fire and the occasional low hum from Iris monitoring his vitals.

After about twenty minutes, Iris spoke again. “That should be enough. The surface temperature is stable. You can eat.”

Kael pulled the meat away from the fire, the surface charred but still steaming. He took a bite and grimaced immediately. “Ugh. Still terrible.”

“You can’t expect good flavor from plain roasted meat,” Iris replied evenly. “You’d need other ingredients—spices, salt—to make it taste right.”

Kael frowned. “Then why didn’t you tell me that earlier? I could’ve cooked it properly.”

“First of all,” Iris said, a hint of dry humor in her tone, “we don’t have any ingredients. All modern food was synthesized automatically, and with the power down, those systems are offline. You’ll have to make do. And second—don’t forget, most people out there don’t even know how to start a fire right now. They’re starving, Kael.”

That silenced him. He sighed, lowering his gaze. “Yeah… fair point.”

The small cat beside him stretched and let out a soft meow, rubbing against his leg.

Kael looked down and smiled faintly. “Hungry, little one?” He tore off a piece of meat and offered it. “Here, try some.”

The cat sniffed it once, then began tearing into it with surprising strength. Within moments, the meat was gone—ripped apart faster than Kael could even finish chewing his own.

He stared in disbelief. “Uh… guess I didn’t give you enough.”

Iris’s tone turned analytical. “Incorrect. That portion was over three-quarters the size of yours. It seems this little kitty is quite the eater.”

Kael grumbled, half amused. “Great. A bottomless stomach.”

Still, he couldn’t resist. He cut off two more slices and laid them down. The cat devoured them just as quickly, tail flicking contentedly before curling up near the fire again.

By the time they were both done, nearly a quarter of the dog’s meat was gone. Kael leaned back, full but weary, watching the cat settle beside him.

“Guess we’re partners now,” he muttered.

The cat only purred, eyes glinting faintly in the firelight.fter the meal, Iris’s voice came through again, gentle but firm.  
“Kael, it’s better if you take a bath. You’re still covered in dirt and dried blood. And while you’re at it, give that little kitty one too. There should be a restroom for staff use inside the Hub—we can use that.”

Kael glanced down at himself, then at the soot-streaked floor. “Yeah… fair enough,” he admitted.

He stood and walked toward the cat. The small creature was darting around the room, chasing sparks of light from the fire. But as Kael approached, it stopped, purred softly, and rubbed against his leg.

“Alright, come here, you little troublemaker,” he said, scooping it up.

He followed the dim signs along the corridor until he found the restroom—a compact, box-shaped unit with metallic walls. Inside, a funnel-like fixture hung from the ceiling, and rows of inactive controls lined one wall.

Iris guided him, her tone practical. “Since there’s no power, the water systems won’t activate automatically. We’ll have to do this manually. See that funnel above you? That’s the main faucet.”

“Got it.”

“Use your spear to break it open—but only a small hole,” she warned. “We don’t want to flood the room.”

Kael gripped the shaft of his makeshift spear and jabbed carefully. With a sharp clang, the pipe cracked. A thin stream of clear water poured down, splashing against the floor and echoing softly in the metal chamber.

“Perfect,” Iris said. “That should be enough.”

Kael stripped off his torn, blood-stained shirt and stepped under the water. The chill hit him instantly, washing away layers of grime and fatigue. He took a deep breath, running his fingers through his hair and across the old scars along his chest.

Then came the harder part.

He placed the cat under the stream. The moment the water hit, the little creature froze—then exploded into motion, yowling and thrashing like a wild thing. Kael laughed, half wrestling, half calming it.

“Hey—easy, easy! It’s just water!” he said, holding it steady.

Through their strange bond, he projected calm—small, steady waves of reassurance. The cat slowed, shivering slightly but no longer fighting him. Kael rubbed it gently, washing away the dirt and dried blood from its fur.

After a few minutes, both man and cat were soaked but clean.

The Kitty has now become completely different, its brown colour was not its skin but just dirt.  
Now that it is clean, it has now become completly pristine white, with no hint of any other colour.

Kael stepped out, dripping but refreshed. “You know,” he said with a tired grin, “I think that’s the best I’ve felt since this whole mess started.”

Iris’s voice carried a hint of satisfaction. “Good. Hygiene helps stabilize your vitals—and your mind.”

Kael looked down at the small cat wrapped in a scrap of his shirt, now quietly purring in his arms.  
“Guess we both needed that,” he murmured with a faint smile.

After a moment, he met the cat’s clear, pale eyes. “Iris, don’t you think calling it ‘little kitty’ is a bit... plain? We should give it a real name.”

“I agree,” Iris said, her tone gentle. “Go ahead, Kael. You choose.”

Kael studied the cat’s snow-white fur that shimmered faintly under the flickering lights. “How about Cherry?” he said after a pause. “Not for the fruit—but for the old white cherry tree we used to have. It reminds me of peace... and home.”

Iris’s voice softened. “Cherry. Yes, that suits it perfectly.”

Kael smiled. “From now on, your name is Cherry.”

The little cat tilted its head, then purred happily, darting around the Hub in light, graceful hops. For a brief moment, the place—once silent and grim—felt alive again.

Iris spoke once more, her tone calm and caring. “Kael, you should rest. You’re still injured, and recovery takes time. The meat you ate will help your body heal overnight. Let yourself recover.”

Kael nodded slowly. “Yeah... I know.” He leaned back against the cold wall, letting the exhaustion finally catch up to him.

He recalled an old saying his mother once told him: “The best bridge between despair and hope is a good night’s sleep.”

As his eyes grew heavy, Cherry leapt softly into his lap, curled up, and began to purr again.

Kael let out a quiet breath, a hint of peace settling over him for the first time in days.  
Together, man and cat drifted into sleep beneath the faint hum of a broken world.

**Chapter 7**

Morning came quietly.  
Kael woke earlier than he expected, even though he’d fallen asleep well past midnight.

Cherry was curled up in his arms, her soft white fur warm against his skin. When he moved, she stirred—eyes half-open, blinking up at him sleepily.

Kael chuckled. “Hey there, sleepyhead.”

He glanced toward the horizon. Dawn had come, but the sky looked more like dusk. A deep golden-red light bled across the clouds, the reflection of the fires still raging far in the distance. The land itself seemed to glow with a restless burn.

Kael’s voice turned serious. “Iris, we need to cross the Yodo River soon. If the fire keeps spreading at this rate, it’ll reach here in a few days. It’s moving outward—slow, but steady.”

Iris’s voice resonated from his wrist, calm yet grave. “You’re right. The flames are devouring everything—buildings, soil, even stone. From my analysis, the ground itself seems to be burning. The faster we cross, the better our chances.”

Cherry meowed softly, drawing Kael’s attention. He blinked and frowned. “Wait a second... Iris, doesn’t Cherry look—bigger than yesterday?”

Iris paused for a brief scan. “Yes. Her body mass has increased significantly. Yesterday she appeared about two months old. Now her size matches a four-month-old.”

Kael’s eyebrows rose. “That fast, huh?”

“And Kael,” Iris added, “your injuries have also improved far beyond normal healing speed. The lacerations on your chest and arm are nearly closed. Based on your vitals, you’ll be fully healed in two days. Your overall strength has also increased—likely due to the residual energy absorbed from the mutated dog.”

Kael flexed his arm and realized she was right. The pain had dulled, replaced by a faint warmth under his skin.

Then Iris shared the report directly to his mind:

**Kael Ardyn – IRIS Status Report**  
**Age:** 21  
**Time Post-Awakening:** 1 Month  
**Location:** Food Distribution Hub, Osaka Ruins

| **Core Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength | **1.80** (from 1.60) |
| Speed | **1.56** (from 1.26) |
| Life Force | **1.90** (from 1.70) |
| Stamina | **1.90** (from 1.70) |
| Constitution | **1.57** (from 1.37) |
| Reaction | **0.26s** (unchanged) |

“Iris,” Kael said slowly, “let’s run a check on Cherry too. I want to know what’s happening with her.”

“Understood.”

Tiny components unfolded from Iris’s watch form. A small syringe extended and pricked Cherry gently. She didn’t even flinch—just looked curiously at Kael as the device withdrew. Moments later, the data appeared in his mind.

**Cherry – IRIS Status Report**  
**Age:** 2 Months  
**Time Post-Awakening:** 1 Month  
**Location:** Food Distribution Hub, Osaka Ruins

| **Core Attribute** | **Value** |
| --- | --- |
| Strength | **2.04** (from 1.65) |
| Speed | **8.59** (from 8.24) |
| Life Force | **1.80** (from 1.20) |
| Stamina | **1.80** (from 1.20) |
| Constitution | **1.55** (from 1.15) |

Kael’s jaw tightened slightly. “Hold on… Cherry’s strength is higher than mine? How is that even possible? We ate the same food.”

Iris answered in her usual calm tone. “First, Cherry consumed a larger quantity than you. Second, she’s still a young organism—growth at her stage is naturally accelerated. And third…”

Kael groaned before she could finish. “Don’t tell me—she was already stronger than me to begin with.”

“Exactly,” Iris confirmed.

Kael sighed, leaning back. “Great. Outdone by a two-month-old cat.”

Cherry tilted her head and meowed proudly, as if agreeing.

Kael couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, yeah. You win, Cherry.”

Still, deep down, he felt a quiet reassurance. If Cherry was growing stronger this fast, maybe—just maybe—they had a real chance at surviving what was coming.

Iris’s voice echoed softly from Kael’s wrist.  
“Kael, prepare your gear. It’s time to move toward the river.”

Kael tightened the straps of his worn pack and looked around the Hub one last time. “Yeah,” he muttered. “No point staying here any longer.”

Cherry perched neatly on his shoulder, tail swaying, eyes alert as always.

Iris spoke again, calm and strategic. “Head through the open streets with fewer buildings. Fewer structures mean fewer places for mutated creatures—or people—to hide.”

Kael gave a short nod. “Got it.”

He set out, moving cautiously through the crumbling streets of Osaka. The sky above was still tinged with red from distant fires, and ash floated lazily in the air. What once had been a bustling district was now silent—cars overturned, glass shattered, and every sound carried too far.

The Yodo River was only eight kilometers away, but with the growing number of mutants, the trip would take hours. Kael had to stay slow, deliberate, and quiet.

After barely an hour, the first attack came.

A cluster of mutated beetles scuttled out from a cracked sewer line—each the size of a human fist, their shells black and gleaming. They clattered against the concrete, lunging in sudden bursts. Kael swung his spear in quick arcs, breaking through their hard carapaces one after another. When the last one split apart with a crunch, he stepped back, breathing hard.

“Beetles,” he muttered. “They’re getting faster.”

“They’re also more aggressive,” Iris replied. “Their muscle density has doubled since pre-Awakening insects. Keep your distance next time. Use the spear’s reach.”

Kael nodded silently and moved on.

Not long after, he ducked into a half-collapsed medical shop. The shelves were mostly empty, but a few things still remained—scattered bandages, a cracked medkit, some nutrient pods sealed in reinforced glass. He brushed off the dust and packed everything usable.

“Iris, check the pods.”

“Analyzing,” she said, scanning through his wrist device. “Still stable. Two are for stamina regeneration, one for tissue repair. Keep them safe—you may need them soon.”

“Noted.”

Back outside, he followed a quieter street that led toward the river. But peace didn’t last long.

Iris alerted him immediately, “Kael there is a presence nearby.”

A shadow darted across a broken wall—a mutated cat, much larger than Cherry, muscles rippling under its dark fur. Its eyes glowed faint red, fangs bared as it hissed low.

Kael froze. He didn’t want to fight it. “Iris,” he said under his breath, “I’d rather avoid killing it. Might make Cherry uneasy.”

But Cherry’s reaction was the opposite. The small cat on his shoulder arched her back and hissed violently, fur standing on end. Before Kael could react, she nearly leapt off his shoulder toward the other cat.

“Whoa, easy!” He grabbed her just in time. “Hey! Calm down!”

Iris’s voice cut in. “Kael, If you hesitate, it’ll attack first.”

Kael clenched his jaw, lowering Cherry gently behind a wall. Then he faced the beast head-on. When it lunged, he sidestepped and drove the spear clean through its neck. It hit the ground with a guttural snarl before falling still.

He stood there for a moment, breathing heavily. “Damn it. Didn’t want to do that.”

Cherry watched quietly from behind the car, her anger gone—only calm acceptance in her eyes.

Kael wiped the blood from his weapon and pressed on.

Two hours later, the streets narrowed again. The air was thicker, buzzing faintly. He stopped instantly. “Iris, you hear that?”

“Above you,” she warned.

A swarm of oversized mosquitoes descended from the upper floors of a half-collapsed office building, their wings vibrating like power drills. Each one was as large as his palm, their proboscises glinting like needles.

Kael gritted his teeth. “Fantastic.”

He ducked into an alley, snatching up a broken metal sheet. As the swarm dived, he swung it like a shield, smashing several mid-air. Iris guided his strikes, her tone crisp and measured.

“Swing horizontally—good. Now pivot. Aim for the abdomen; their carapace is weakest there.”

Kael fought methodically, driven by her voice, until the last few creatures fell twitching to the ground.

When the buzzing faded, he slumped against a wall, chest rising and falling hard. Cherry trotted up to him, meowing softly.

“I’m fine,” he said, ruffling her fur with one hand. “Just... tired.”

“You’re doing well,” Iris said. “Another hour, and we’ll reach the riverbank. Rest for five minutes, then move. I’ll monitor the area.”

Kael rested for a few minutes, catching his breath before pressing on. The air was still heavy with ash, each step crunching faintly over shattered glass and broken pavement. He had barely crossed two city blocks when Iris’s voice suddenly sharpened in his ear.

“Kael, stop!”

He froze instantly, spear halfway raised.

“What is it?”

“I’m detecting movement ahead,” Iris said. “A group of five people. I can’t determine if they’re mutated or not from this range. I’ll need you to get closer for a clearer reading.”

Kael’s heart skipped. “People?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Iris confirmed. “But Kael…” Her tone softened, edged with warning. “Remember—human nature can’t always be trusted. A friend today can turn against you tomorrow, especially when survival and resources are at stake. We’ll observe them first from a distance. If they seem stable, we’ll consider contact.”

Kael nodded silently, mind steadying. Hope and caution… always together now.

He moved quietly through the street, hugging the walls as Iris guided him mentally. The signal led to a retail store—one of the automated outlets that used to run entirely on AI systems before the collapse. The glass front was cracked, displays long dead, shelves looted.

“Iris,” he whispered, crouching behind a fallen sign, “this the place?”

“Yes. Inside that building. Five heat signatures—three males, two females. From my analysis, two of the males are adults, one is younger. Among the females, one adult and one child. They don’t appear mutated… but stay alert.”

Kael edged forward until he reached a window. He peeked through a narrow gap.

Inside, the dim interior flickered with faint daylight from the broken ceiling. Three figures sat on the floor—an adult woman cradling a small girl in her arms, the child looked weary but the mother held her with a determined face. Nearby, two men rummaged through the store shelves, tossing aside empty containers and broken equipment in search of nutrient pods.

Kael’s eyes lingered on the group, measuring their movements, their condition… and then froze.

Among them, sitting quietly beside the woman, was a familiar face—a man in his twenties with a shock of vibrant, unnatural blue hair falling over his eyes, clad in a neon-trimmed windbreaker and cargo pants.

For a moment, Kael thought his mind was playing tricks on him. But no—there was no mistake.  
It was someone he knew.  
Someone from the same college.  
Hirota.

His chest tightened. A classmate—from Osaka Metaverse College.  
He hadn’t seen a familiar face in over a month.

Cherry shifted on his shoulder, sensing his sudden change in emotion, and let out a quiet mewl. Kael placed a finger to her lips.

“Iris,” he spoke mentally, “that’s someone I know.”

Iris paused briefly before replying, her tone calm but edged with warning.  
“Then be careful, Kael. Familiarity doesn’t always mean safety. But if they turn hostile, remember—you and Cherry are far stronger than ordinary humans. You can handle yourselves.”

Kael inhaled deeply, steadying his heartbeat. He brushed the dust from his coat, adjusted his grip on the spear, and stepped from behind the wall.

The door of the shop creaked as he approached. Inside, the woman holding her child was the first to see him. Her eyes widened.  
“Who’s there?!” she shouted.

The two men reacted instantly. One older—mid-fifties, gray hair, face hardened by exhaustion—raised a pulse gun. Its faint hum lit his hands blue. The other, bulkier and perhaps forty, lifted an electric baton, its coils sparking faintly.

Kael froze.  
Pulse gun?  
He hadn’t seen a functioning one since before the world fell apart. For a second, his mind blanked. That thing could kill me in an instant.

He forced his voice steady. “My name’s Kael Ardyn,” he said slowly, lifting his hand in surrender while keeping the spear down. “I mean no harm. I saw your group and thought maybe we could help each other.”

The group didn’t lower their weapons. The air between them was heavy—fragile, one breath away from chaos. Then the woman’s eyes darted to his shoulder.

Her face twisted. “A cat!!!—what is that thing?!” she hissed, raising her gun again.

Kael’s pulse spiked. “No! Don’t shoot!” he blurted out, stepping back. “She’s not dangerous! She’s with me!”

Cherry hissed sharply, fur bristling, a faint blue glint flickering in her eyes.

Iris’s voice rang inside Kael’s mind. Kael, their hostility level is rising. Prepare to disengage. Use Cherry to create a distraction if necessary—

Before she could finish, a sudden shout cut through the tension.

“Stop!!”

All eyes turned.

A young man stepped forward, holding the small girl protectively behind him. His face was smudged with dirt and fatigue, but his eyes—sharp, electric blue beneath messy hair—locked onto Kael with disbelief.

“Kael… is that really you?”

Kael blinked, his heart thudding in his chest. He let his grip on the spear loosen just slightly and pulled a faint, almost hesitant smile—half genuine, half guarded.

“You…” he said, forcing surprise into his tone as if testing the words. “You’re… Hirota? Hirota Ren?”

Chapter 8

Hirota’s eyes widened as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Then, all at once, his expression broke into a trembling smile.  
“Yes, Kael—it’s me. Hirota Ren,” he said, voice unsteady but filled with relief. “I never thought I’d see someone I know again... someone still alive.”

But then his tone shifted, the joy breaking into something fragile. “I never thought… I’d see anyone again.”  
His voice cracked. The words caught in his throat.  
And then—he fell to his knees, shoulders shaking.  
“I never… thought…”

Kael froze for a moment before kneeling down beside him, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. Hirota’s sobs came raw and desperate. Kael didn’t say anything—he simply held him there.

For the first time since the world fell apart, Kael felt guilt—not for surviving, but for doubting someone who once shared his world.

The others stayed silent. The woman lowered her pulse gun. The older man eased his stance. The tension slowly drained from the room.

Hirota’s voice came again, broken and trembling.  
“My father… he died protecting me and my mother. His last words were to keep her safe—to be strong. I tried, Kael. I fought everything… those giant mosquitoes, the beetles, even a mutated dog. We survived so many nights.”  
He wiped his eyes, shaking his head. “But I couldn’t protect her. She saved me in the end. She pushed me away and…” His voice broke again. “Her last words were the same as his—‘Be safe.’”

No one spoke. Even Cherry went still, the faint sound of her purring fading into the silence.

The old man—gray-haired, firm but kind-eyed—walked forward. He placed a weathered hand on Hirota’s shoulder.  
“You’ve suffered much, young man,” he said in a voice that carried quiet strength. “But hardship forges the will to live. Remember their words. Remember their sacrifices. They wanted you safe—so live. Grow stronger, and survive for their sake.”

His words seemed to ripple through the group. For a moment, even Kael felt something stir—a reminder of what it meant to keep moving forward.

Iris’s voice whispered in Kael’s mind.  
“Kael, that man… his posture, his tone. He’s a retired soldier. I can tell from his discipline.”

Kael nodded slightly in thought. The man’s presence radiated command, calm and control—something the world rarely had anymore.

Hirota slowly stood, wiping the last of his tears. “Thank you, Tanaka… Grandpa,” he said, using the affectionate term survivors had begun calling the older man. “If not for you that day, I’d have been torn apart by that flock of mutated crows.”

He turned back toward Kael, forcing a faint smile. “This is Kael Ardyn—he’s from my college, Osaka Metaverse College. We—”

But the woman suddenly cut him off, voice sharp with suspicion.  
“I don’t care who he is,” she said coldly, pointing toward Kael. “I want to know why he has that cat. Is it mutated like the others?”

Instantly, the air grew tense again.

The old man, Tanaka, raised a hand, steadying the moment. “Kael,” he said evenly. “I trust Hirota, and I want to trust you. But you understand our concern. That cat—you’re sure it’s safe? Not mutated?”

Inside Kael’s mind, Iris’s voice came quick and firm.  
“Kael, no matter what—don’t reveal Cherry’s mutation or your increased strength from the mutated meat. It will only draw danger.”

Kael’s arms tightened around Cherry as she nestled closer into his chest. He gave a small nod, composing himself before speaking aloud.

“Actually,” he said, voice calm, “her name’s Cherry. I found her a few days ago in a food distribution hub. She’s the only normal animal I’ve seen since the world went to hell. I… wanted to protect that little bit of sanity left.”

The woman’s expression softened slightly. The tension in the room eased. Even Tanaka seemed satisfied with the answer.

“I see,” Tanaka said after a moment. “A remnant of peace in chaos… That’s worth holding onto.” He crossed his arms. “Tell me then, Kael—where have you been since the disaster struck?”

Kael looked past them, through the broken windows of the shop, where the morning light bled through the red-stained sky.