**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.

**Chapter 1: Awakening of the Forgotten**

The skies burned crimson in the year 2120.

Ash drifted through the broken heavens like black snow as humanity’s great cities—once towering monuments to ambition—crumbled beneath the roars of creatures older than memory. In this broken age, survival was no birthright. It was seized with blood, grit, and will.

Among the ruins of Old Tokyo, a boy moved like a shadow over the shattered skeletons of skyscrapers.  
His name was **Kael Ardyn** — and unlike the millions who had fallen when the world shattered, Kael had *changed*.

The mutations had not twisted him into a monster. Instead, they had sharpened him. His blood carried a volatile energy, a reckless new life force birthed by ancient forces and human folly. His senses could pierce the thick ash; his muscles, woven with unnatural strength, could lift steel beams like fallen branches. But the power came with a curse. Some nights, Kael felt the primal instincts inside him gnawing for dominance — instincts that didn’t care if he stayed human.

Tonight, survival was all that mattered.

He crouched behind a collapsed magrail pylon, breathing slow and deep. In his hands was a weapon of the old and new — a jagged spear forged from scavenged alloys and bound with whispering runes, remnants of forgotten lore.

Above, a mutated panther — now the size of a transport truck, its skin rippling with molten veins — prowled the rooftops. Its golden eyes gleamed like twin suns as it searched, nose twitching.

*Stay low. Stay silent.* Kael gripped his spear tighter, every muscle taut.

He had made a vow long ago, standing among the ashes of his family’s home:  
He would not just survive. He would *adapt*.  
Mankind’s age of dominion was over.  
Now began the age of **the evolved**.

**Chapter 2: Ash and Hunger**

The world was silent, except for the soft hum of Kael’s wristwatch.  
A slim black band, almost weightless, pulsed gently on his wrist.

"**Kael, I’m detecting organic remnants 200 meters northeast.**"  
The voice was soft, mechanical, yet held a warmth Kael had grown to rely on. It belonged to **Iris**, his AI companion — the last gift from a civilization that no longer existed.

Kael nodded and shifted his path, slipping through the cracked husk of an abandoned food distribution hub. The floors were littered with shattered drones, their sleek chrome shells torn apart during the first riots. Above, broken neon signs flickered — holographic menus from another era projecting ghostly burgers and sushi plates into the dust-choked air.

He moved cautiously, stepping over twisted metal and fallen beams. Every sense sharpened, his mutated instincts picking up the faintest vibrations in the air.

"**Energy signatures minimal, but I am tracking faint bio-signs nearby. Remain alert, Kael.**"  
Iris’s voice always stayed calm. It kept him sane.

**Three Years Earlier...**

Kael had been an ordinary boy once — seventeen, a freshman at Tokyo Metaverse College, studying cybernetics. His days were filled with holographic lectures, zero-gravity sports tournaments, and AI programming labs.  
Life was bright, limitless.

Until the Awakening.

When the ancient creatures rose, Tokyo was one of the first cities to fall. His campus became a battlefield overnight.  
He had watched towering beasts crack smart-buildings like glass; drones scream helplessly as electromagnetic storms shut down global defense grids.  
In the chaos, Kael’s parents — both leading researchers — had uploaded Iris into his wristwatch, shoving it onto his arm before their lab was engulfed.

*"Stay alive, Kael,"* his mother had whispered.

Since then, Kael had learned to scavenge among ruins, outsmart mutated predators, and rebuild lost tech from scraps. He had survived not because he was the strongest — but because he learned faster than the world could kill him.

Back in the present, Kael pushed open a shattered security door.  
Inside, stacked against the walls, he found it: preserved nutrient pods, sealed inside a stasis-lock crate.

A rare smile tugged at his lips.

"Jackpot," he whispered.

Suddenly, Iris chimed urgently: "**Movement detected. Incoming threat. 80 meters and closing fast.**"

Kael snatched up the pods, slung his makeshift satchel over his shoulder, and sprinted for the shadows.

In this new world, every victory came with a cost.

And the hunt never truly ended.

**📜 Character Profile: Kael Ardyn**

* **Name:** Kael Ardyn
* **Age:** 17
* **Origin:** Tokyo Metaverse College, Cybernetics Department (First-Year Student)
* **Background:**  
  + Before the Awakening, Kael was a bright student, specializing in artificial intelligence, biotech, and cybernetic enhancements.
  + After the fall, he survived alone among the ruins, scavenging old tech, adapting ancient survival tactics, and mutating slowly under the Earth's new chaotic energy.
* **Appearance:**  
  + Height: 5'11" (Post-mutation: 6'2" when fully tensed)
  + Build: Lean, slightly muscular (Post-mutation: Athletic, dense muscle fibers)
  + Hair: Black, with faint silver strands (mutation side-effect)
  + Eyes: Once brown, now faintly glowing silver-blue under certain light.
* **Personality:**  
  + Tactical thinker, calm under pressure.
  + Deep loyalty to those he trusts.
  + Sharp-witted, tends to make dry, sarcastic jokes even in danger.
* **Abilities:**  
  + Enhanced strength, speed, reflexes, and stamina due to mutation.
  + Quick adaptation to environmental threats.
  + Skilled in crafting hybrid weapons (ancient + futuristic).
* **Weaknesses:**  
  + Mutation side-effects: Occasional berserk impulses.
  + Emotional trauma from survivor’s guilt.
  + Limited resources and advanced weaponry.

**🤖 Character Profile: IRIS (Integrated Reactive Intelligence System)**

* **Core Type:** Class-4 Adaptive AI
* **Appearance:** Projected interface via Kael’s wristwatch — thin holo-display or direct voice communication.
* **Original Purpose:** Personal Academic Assistant and Health Monitor.
* **Current Evolution:** Survival AI, Combat Analyst, Mutation Tracker.
* **Primary Abilities:**  
  + 📡 **Environmental Scan** — Detect food, threats, hidden structures within a 500-meter radius.
  + 🔍 **Physiological Scan** — Track Kael’s vital signs, mutation rates, and enhancements.
  + 🧬 **Mutation Log** — Analyze and record changes in Kael's DNA structure.
  + 🐲 **Monster Database** — Scan, identify, and catalog enemy creatures encountered, noting weaknesses if possible.
  + ⚡ **Energy Reserve Management** — Manages energy levels for tech equipment Kael uses.
* **Personality:**  
  + Calm, nurturing tone with slight sarcasm learned from Kael.
  + Protective but rational; prefers tactical retreats over reckless fights.

**📊 Kael’s Physical Change Report (Generated by IRIS)**

**Pre-Awakening Scan (Age 16):**

* **Strength: 0.72 (Average human = 1)**
* **Speed: 0.78**
* **Reflex Time: 0.31 seconds**
* **Stamina: 1.0 (baseline endurance for normal teenagers)**
* **Cognitive Processing Speed: 1.02 (slightly above average)**

**Post-Mutation Current Scan (Age 17):**

* **Strength: 3.4 (3.4× stronger than average human)**
* **Speed: 5.2 (5.2× faster running speed)**
* **Reflex Time: 0.07 seconds (greatly enhanced reaction speed)**
* **Stamina: 6.0 (able to sustain activity 6× longer than average)**
* **Cognitive Processing Speed: 2.8 (nearly triple pattern recognition, prediction capabilities)**

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density: 4.0 (4× denser muscle fibers)**
* **Bone Density: 2.8 (2.8× stronger bone structure)**
* **Minor Neural Evolution: Signal transmission accelerated by ~3× baseline.**

**✅ Key Points with this system:**

* **1.0 = Normal Human**
* **2.0 = Twice as powerful**
* **5.0 = Five times, and so on.**

**📚 Bonus: Iris’s Monster Database (Example Entry)**

**Species:** "Ferro Panther"  
**Classification:** Mutated Mammal  
**Height:** 2.5 meters  
**Weight:** ~1500 kg  
**Known Abilities:** Camouflage, Electromagnetic Disruptions, Ultra-enhanced senses.  
**Weakness Detected:** Slower recovery time after heavy impacts to spinal region.

**Chapter 3: The Clash Beneath the Ashen Sky**

The rubble beneath Kael’s boots shifted slightly.  
He froze.

“Iris,” he whispered. “Proximity scan.”

A soft, emotionless chime answered him.

**[Threat detected: 25 meters. Species: Unknown. Estimated Size: 2.1 meters. Caution advised.]**

From the wreckage of a collapsed train station ahead, a monstrous form slithered into view — hunched, quivering with unnatural tension. It was a rat.  
Or what had once been a rat.

Its body was swollen grotesquely, armored with patchy plates of keratinized flesh. Jagged yellow teeth jutted from a misshapen muzzle. Its eyes, bulbous and wet, glowed like molten amber. It wasn’t scurrying — it was *stalking.*

Kael tightened his grip on his makeshift spear — a weapon forged from collapsed reactor alloys and reinforced with old-world carbon fiber. It was light but brutally sharp.

The rat hissed, baring teeth longer than Kael's fingers.  
Then it charged.

Kael *moved*. His body, enhanced by mutation, reacted faster than thought. He sidestepped, barely missing a swipe of gnarled claws, and thrust forward.  
The spear sank into the beast’s thick hide — but barely.

**[Warning: Outer dermis 3.2× human toughness. Penetration minimal.]** Iris reported calmly in his ear.

Kael cursed, wrenching the spear free just in time as the monster twisted, lashing out. Its claws grazed his side, slicing through the reinforced armor and drawing a shallow but burning cut along his ribs.

Pain flared. His vision pulsed red.  
He staggered — but *adapted*.

"Focus, Kael," he hissed to himself.

This wasn’t a human fight. Brute strength wouldn’t win.  
He needed precision.

The mutated rat lunged again, its bulk faster than it had any right to be. Kael pivoted low, barely ducking under its snapping jaws, and drove the spear upward with both hands — straight into the joint between the creature’s shoulder and chest.

**CRACK.**  
The joint gave way with a sickening crunch.

The monster screeched, thrashing madly. One claw caught Kael across the shoulder, tearing through skin and muscle like paper. He bit back a scream, adrenaline flooding his body.

Blood dripped from his arm, warm and fast. His vision blurred.  
But he didn’t back down.

Gritting his teeth, Kael twisted the spear deeper, driving it sideways into the heart cavity. With a shudder, the rat gave a final convulsion and collapsed, its enormous bulk hitting the cracked asphalt like a toppled monument.

Kael staggered back, breath heaving.

**“Damage report, Iris," he rasped.**

**[Lacerations on left ribcage and right shoulder. Non-fatal. Blood loss at 12%. Vital signs stable. Recommend medical attention within 8 hours.]**

He leaned on the spear, wiping blood from his forehead with a shaking hand.  
Even a *rat* was enough to nearly kill him now.

Kael smiled grimly through the pain.

If this was the new world, he thought,  
then he would become something tougher than anything it could throw at him.

He pulled the spear free from the monster’s corpse with a wet, wrenching sound and limped onward into the ash-choked ruins.

**Chapter 4: The Taste of Survival**

The sun, a dull ember behind choking clouds, dipped lower into the broken skyline.  
Kael's stomach growled, a low painful reminder of reality.

He stalked through the ruins for hours — broken stores, hollowed apartments, shattered cafeterias.  
Everywhere he looked, the same grim result: *nothing*.  
Every scrap of packaged food had long since rotted into toxic sludge.  
Canned goods were burst open, spoiled by time and exposure.  
The world had starved long before Kael arrived here.

He kicked over the remains of an old vending machine in frustration.  
A single, shattered bottle of water rolled out, empty.

"Damn it," he muttered, leaning on his spear.

"Iris," he said hoarsely. "Options?"

The AI answered in her neutral voice:  
**[No edible resources detected within a five-kilometer radius. Immediate sustenance required. Survival odds will decrease within 24 hours if caloric intake not resumed.]**

Kael clenched his jaw.

His gaze drifted — unwillingly — back to the monstrous corpse he had left behind.

The rat’s grotesque form still twitched slightly as gases escaped the body.  
It reeked of burnt fur, blood, and raw flesh.

Kael grimaced. Every instinct screamed against it.  
But there was no choice.

"Iris... scan the meat. Is it... safe?"

**[Scanning... Mutagenic contamination: Low. Digestive risk: Moderate. Survival priority: Recommend controlled ingestion.]**

"Controlled ingestion," he muttered darkly. "Right."

He set to work, using his spear to slice chunks of relatively clean muscle from the creature’s flank. Then, gathering shattered debris, he sparked a fire — primitive, but effective — with scraps of old-world wire and synthetic cloth.

The flames hissed and danced.

Kael roasted the meat, blackening the outer layers to kill whatever nightmare bacteria lurked inside.  
The smell was unbearable — acrid, greasy, revolting.  
But hunger was stronger than disgust.

By the dim firelight, he gritted his teeth and bit into the charred meat.  
It was tough, stringy, and tasted of death.  
He gagged once — then forced himself to chew, swallow, and chew again.

Bite after bite, he swallowed the horror of this new world.

Later, with the fire smoldering low and his body twitching with exhaustion, he sat back against a broken wall.

**"Iris," he rasped. "Scan me. Full report."**

There was a brief hum.

**[Scanning complete.]**

**📊 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* Strength: **+0.005 increase**
* Speed: **+0.005 increase**
* Stamina: **+0.005 increase**
* Cognitive Processing Speed: **+0.005 increase**
* Reflex Time: **Stable at 0.07 seconds**
* Muscle Density: **+0.005 increase**
* Bone Density: **+0.005 increase**

Mutation Rate: **Increased by +0.1**

Kael blinked.

So little improvement… for so much pain.

But even the smallest step forward was still a step.  
And in this world, the smallest advantage could mean the difference between life and death.

He closed his eyes, resting his battered body.

Tomorrow, he would move again.  
Tomorrow, he would find something better.  
Or die trying.

**Chapter 5: A Fragile Life**

Kael woke instantly, muscles coiled, spear in hand.

The noise — a sharp, broken whimper — echoed through the ruins.

His heart thudded painfully against his ribs as he crouched low, scanning the half-collapsed room.

"Iris," he whispered, "visual scan — now."

**[Initiating scan...]**

A soft pulse of blue light swept from his wristwatch, illuminating the debris.

Movement — small, frantic — near a shattered cabinet.

Kael tightened his grip on the spear.

Then he saw it.

A small cat, barely larger than his forearm, lay writhing among the rubble.  
Its body twitched violently, muscles spasming under the skin.  
Thin black lines ran along its spine, glowing faintly.  
Its fur, once soft and grey, now flickered with patches of strange, hardened scales.

Mutation.

But unlike the monstrous creatures he had faced before, this one was... struggling.

It wasn't a predator yet.  
It was vulnerable. Frighteningly so.

"Iris," Kael murmured, frowning. "Identify species."

**[Querying database...]**  
**[Error. No complete match found.]**  
**[Partial data: Domestic Feline – Subject in mid-mutation. Mutation path unknown.]**

Kael hesitated, a knot forming in his chest.

Logic screamed to kill it now. Before it grew dangerous.  
One more mutant roaming the ruins could mean death — for him, or someone else.

"Iris," he said, voice tight. "Advice."

There was a pause.

**[Subject displays high instability. Threat level: Currently low. Potential future threat: Variable.]**

**[Survival logic suggests elimination.]**

Kael's knuckles whitened around his spear.

But something deep inside — something still human — resisted.

He slowly lowered the weapon.

"No," he muttered. "Not yet."

Carefully, Kael shifted broken concrete off the struggling creature.  
He crouched beside it, his hand hesitating — then reaching out.

Gently, he ran his fingers along its trembling side, careful to avoid the forming scales.

The cat let out a tiny, broken noise.  
Kael murmured soothing nonsense, the way he had once spoken to strays back in the old world.

Minutes passed.

The cat’s convulsions gradually slowed.

Its breathing grew shallow, labored.

Kael stayed close, watching, tense, ready — but refusing to leave it alone.

Finally, with a last shudder, the creature fell still.

It wasn’t dead — at least, not yet.

But the mutation had changed it:

* Its claws were now faintly curved and gleamed harder than bone.
* A faint, almost imperceptible glow pulsed under the skin near its spine.

Kael sat by its side, refusing to sleep, refusing to leave it.

He didn’t know if he had just made a terrible mistake.  
He didn’t know if the cat would wake up and become another monster.

But for now… it was alive.

And so was he.

**Chapter 6: The Awakening of the Bond**

Kael stayed by the small cat’s side, vigilant as the hours passed. Its body, now still, was a stark reminder of the fragile balance between life and mutation. He hadn’t dared to leave it. His fingers occasionally brushed its trembling fur, his thoughts filled with doubt and wonder about what would come next.

Then, it moved.

The cat's head twitched, its body rippling with the final tremors of mutation. Slowly, its eyelids flickered.

Kael leaned forward, instinctively reaching for his spear, but he froze.  
The creature’s eyes cracked open — dull at first, then slowly brightening.

Its pupils, once those of a simple domestic cat, were now elongated and unnaturally reflective, glowing faintly in the dim light.

The cat hissed weakly, its body tensing. Its gaze met Kael's, wild and confused.  
But then, in an instant, its mouth opened in a desperate motion.

Before Kael could react, the cat lunged, its fangs sinking into his finger.

"Ah!" Kael winced, instinctively pulling back. Blood flowed, warm and red.

For a split second, his thoughts clouded in panic — but then, the cat froze, its eyes locking onto his with newfound awareness.

It licked its lips.  
Then, with an odd kind of certainty, it nuzzled its head against Kael’s hand.

The creature, still small and fragile, stared up at him as if it had just *remembered* who he was.

Kael’s breath caught in his throat. Something was happening.

“Iris,” he said, his voice raw from the earlier pain, “scan it again. Now.”

The AI’s response was almost immediate.

**[Scanning... Subject: Domestic Feline Hybrid – Mutation Complete.]**

**🧬 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3x Average Human
* **Speed:** 2.5x Average Human
* **Stamina:** 2x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 1.5x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds
* **Muscle Density:** 3x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2x Average Human

Mutation Rate: **100% Complete – Subject evolved beyond initial species.**

Kael stared at the numbers flashing before his eyes.

Three times stronger than the average human? And it was still so small.  
But the power it held was undeniable.

The cat's small body, compared to the monsters he had faced, was a stark contrast to its strength. It was far weaker than the black panther, but Kael could sense the raw potential in it.

It rubbed against his legs now, its purring deep and comforting — but also a little terrifying.

“You… you’re not a normal cat anymore,” Kael murmured, half in awe, half in disbelief.

The cat’s eyes flicked up to him, and for a brief moment, Kael felt it. The bond. The strange, ancient instinct of loyalty, stronger than anything he had ever felt from any creature.

It was clear.  
It had chosen him.  
And Kael realized, in that instant — he had no choice but to accept it.

The cat was his companion now.

**Chapter 7: The Path Forward**

Kael’s mind was a blur as he sat still, watching the small cat curl up on his shoulder. He could feel the bond between them, but this whole situation still didn’t make sense. The events of the past few hours — the mutation, the strange bite, the cat choosing him — were all too surreal. Was this a consequence of his mutation, or had something else caused this sudden bond?

He shook his head, pushing the questions aside. He had enough to deal with.

"Iris," he whispered, his finger hovering over the watch, "scan my body again. I need to know if I'm recovering."

**[Initiating body scan...]**

A soft, cool pulse came from his watch as the data came to life in front of him.

**🧬 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 35% Healing

**Kael grimaced as he looked at the injury report. His right shoulder still ached from the rat’s attack, the deep gashes slowly healing, but not fast enough. The blood flow had slowed, but the lacerations were still open, and his movements were restricted.**

"Good," he murmured, "I’m improving, but not fast enough."

He reached over and gently adjusted the cat on his shoulder. It meowed softly and stretched its tiny limbs, now curled up comfortably, almost like a natural companion.

“Alright, little one,” Kael said, his voice more resigned than he liked. “We need to find a place to patch up. I’m not risking infection.”

The cat flicked its tail and nuzzled his neck in response, a soft purr vibrating through its tiny body. Despite its strength, it seemed at peace for now.

With a grunt, Kael stood up, testing his weight on the injured shoulder. The pain was still there, but it wasn’t unbearable. He needed shelter, something to keep him safe while he treated himself.

He adjusted his backpack, making sure his spear was still secured, then checked the surrounding ruins once again.

“Let’s go, Iris,” Kael muttered. “Where do we find safety around here?”

**[Scanning... Safe zones: Minimal. First aid locations: 0.45 kilometers east.]**

“East, it is,” Kael said, more to himself than to the cat.

The duo moved carefully through the devastated ruins of the city. The buildings around them were fractured and half-collapsed, and the air smelled of decay and burnt ash. Kael kept his senses heightened, wary of the creatures that still roamed the broken city. Despite his improved abilities, he wasn’t foolish enough to think he was invincible.

**🧬 Physical Status Report: Cat**

**Strength:** 1.2x Average Human  
**Speed:** 8.24x Average Human  
**Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds  
**Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.0x Average Human

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density:** 3.2x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.4x Average Human
* **Enhanced Senses:** Visual and Auditory Processing 3x Human Average

The cat’s speed and reaction time were astonishing. Even Kael, with his new heightened abilities, couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly it could move — darting from one pile of rubble to the next, always ahead of him, its movements a blur. It was as if the cat had gained an instinctual understanding of its surroundings — fast, agile, and ready to act.

The cat’s glowing eyes reflected in the dim light, watching him silently from his shoulder. It was clear that the bond between them had only deepened in the last few hours.

"Stay sharp," Kael muttered to the cat, though it probably understood more than he gave it credit for.

As they made their way east, Kael thought of the others — the ones he had lost. But there was no time to mourn. Not yet.

His shoulder twinged again, a reminder of his mortality.

He just hoped he’d get to the shelter in time before things got worse.

**Chapter 8: The Gathering**

Kael’s footsteps were careful, deliberate, as he moved eastward through the desolate city ruins. The once majestic skyline was now nothing more than crumbling structures, dark shadows against the burning horizon. He could feel the weight of time pressing on him — the remnants of the world he had once known, the comforts of a life that seemed like a distant memory. And yet, survival had become a more complex thing than mere existence.

"Iris," he muttered under his breath, his body still aching from the fight earlier, "Any medical supplies near here?"

**[Scanning... Medical supplies detected: 0.5 kilometers north.]**

Kael gritted his teeth, pushing himself forward despite the lingering pain. He knew that if he didn’t take care of his injuries soon, they might get worse. The cat perched on his shoulder, silent but ever-watchful.

The scent of decay grew stronger as he moved closer to his destination. As he rounded the corner of a broken-down skyscraper, a flicker of movement caught his eye — a group of people huddled near an old medical truck, partially hidden behind a fallen structure. Their figures were blurred against the dimming sky, but there was no mistaking the human presence.

Kael stepped forward, his hand instinctively reaching for his spear, but he kept it lowered. Cautious. The last thing he needed was another unnecessary conflict.

**[Caution: Hostile potential detected. Analyzing... No immediate threats identified.]**

“Iris,” Kael whispered again. “Can you scan them? What do we know?”

**[Scanning... No data available for this group.]**

The lack of data made Kael uneasy. As he approached cautiously, the people turned their heads in unison. Six in total — two women and four men, all of them looking weary, battle-hardened, but alive.

The first to speak was one of the men — older, his face weathered, but his posture strong.

“Who’s there?” His voice was cautious but not unfriendly.

Kael stood still, adjusting the cat on his shoulder. It let out a soft, almost nonchalant meow.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” Kael said, holding up his hands in peace. “I just need medical supplies.”

The older man narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting to the cat, which blinked innocently in Kael’s arms. The others in the group were tense — one of the older men was gripping a makeshift weapon, while another, younger man, looked more curious than cautious. But it was the two women who stood out to Kael.

The younger woman, who looked to be about 12, clutched a small, patched-up backpack tightly, her eyes wide with both fear and curiosity. But it was the older woman — a striking figure of almost 35, beautiful even in the harshness of the apocalypse — who spoke next.

"Why do you have that thing with you?" she asked, her voice sharp, yet tinged with something Kael couldn’t quite read. “That creature.”

Kael hesitated for a moment. The cat’s glowing eyes fixed on the woman, watching her closely. It meowed again, a strange sort of purr.

“This cat saved me,” Kael said, keeping his voice calm. “It’s not dangerous. It’s… different. But I’ve had it with me for a while now.”

One of the men, the youngest in the group — around Kael’s age — stepped forward, eyes narrowing as he looked at the cat. Kael froze, realizing that the young man was staring at him with an expression of recognition.

“Kael? Kael Ardyn?” The voice was hesitant, but there was no mistaking the familiarity.

Kael blinked in disbelief.

“David?” He took a step closer, then squinted. “What... What are you doing here?”

The young man — David, his schoolmate from before the apocalypse — smiled faintly.

“I was on a family leave when everything went down,” David explained. “My parents were... well, they didn’t make it. But you? I never thought I’d see you again, let alone like this.”

Kael felt a rush of conflicting emotions. The relief of seeing a familiar face in this broken world was overwhelming, but the harsh reality of their situation quickly wiped it away.

“I didn’t think I’d be seeing anyone from school again, either,” Kael said, his voice quiet. “But I’m not here for a reunion. I need medical supplies. My shoulder’s been hurt for a while, and I think it’s getting infected.”

David’s expression softened. “We’ve got some supplies here. Come on, I’ll help you.”

But as Kael moved toward the group, the older woman didn’t seem convinced. “You’re not bringing that thing any closer until we know it’s safe.”

Kael sighed, lowering his gaze to the cat. The last thing he wanted was to make this situation worse.

“I promise you, it won’t hurt anyone,” Kael said, his voice steady. “I’m not asking for your approval, just your help.”

After a tense moment of silence, the older man who had spoken first grunted, his face unreadable. He glanced around at the others, who seemed to be in silent discussion.

Finally, the younger woman spoke up, her voice quieter, but determined. “I think we should let him in. If the cat’s really not a threat, then what’s the harm?”

The older woman, who had been skeptical, exchanged a look with the two older men. They nodded reluctantly.

“Alright, fine. You can stay,” she said curtly. “But no one goes near the cat unless I say so.”

Kael nodded, careful not to let his frustration show. He had no intention of pushing his luck.

With that, the group made way for him. As Kael moved closer, the cat gave one final, wary glance at the others, before curling up once more on his shoulder.

David, seeing Kael’s injuries, immediately helped him sit down near the truck where some supplies were stored. Kael took a deep breath, allowing himself to relax for the first time in what felt like ages.

“Well, this is something, huh?” David said, trying to lighten the mood.

Kael gave a half-smile. “Yeah. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“You and me both,” David said, then added with a sigh, “but I guess it’s good to see a familiar face in a place like this.”

Kael sat silently for a moment, his mind racing with thoughts of the cat, of what was happening to the world, and of the strange bond they now shared. Would these people accept him? Would they be able to survive together?

For now, it was a question that would have to wait.

**Chapter 9: The Silent Execution**

The campfire crackled softly, its dim glow casting faint shadows over the group as they huddled together, attempting to find some semblance of comfort in the midst of chaos. Kael lay still, his eyes closed, listening to the rhythm of his own breathing. The cat rested lightly on his shoulder, its warm presence a reminder of the strange bond they shared. Though Kael had not yet fully come to terms with the cat’s origins, he had learned to trust its instincts.

The night was eerily quiet.

Too quiet.

Suddenly, a high-pitched hum sliced through the silence, sending a shiver down Kael’s spine. His eyes snapped open. The cat’s body tensed on his shoulder, its ears flicking toward the source of the noise. Kael shot to his feet, heart pounding in his chest as his mind processed the situation.

**[Scanning... Hostile entities detected: 5 mutated mosquitoes.]**

Kael instinctively reached for his spear, his body readying itself for whatever came next. He turned to the group of survivors who were still asleep, unaware of the incoming danger.

A low rumble of panic began to ripple through the camp as the mosquitoes appeared in the distance, their massive forms flying in a disjointed pattern. These weren’t normal insects. They were mutations — grotesque, bloodthirsty creatures whose wings beat with unnatural speed.

“Wake up!” Kael shouted, his voice hoarse with urgency.

The elder man was the first to react. He grabbed his makeshift weapon, a jagged metal rod, and rushed toward the oncoming threat. The older woman followed closely behind, her expression grim as she unsheathed a combat knife from her belt.

Both of them were ready for a fight. They had lived through too many battles, too many days of constant survival, to let fear dictate their actions.

But as Kael scanned them, he couldn’t help but notice the marked difference in their physical conditions compared to the others.

**[Physical Report – Group Scan]**

**Elder Man:**

* Strength: 4.515x Average Human
* Speed: 3.105x Average Human
* Reflex Time: 0.08 seconds
* Stamina: 4.215x Average Human

**Older Woman:**

* Strength: 4.375x Average Human
* Speed: 3.265x Average Human
* Reflex Time: 0.075 seconds
* Stamina: 4.345x Average Human

**Remaining Group:**

* Strength: 2.150x Average Human (Below Kael’s current levels)
* Speed: 2.805x Average Human (Significantly slower than the mutated mosquitoes)

Kael’s hand tightened around his spear as the mosquitoes drew closer, their wings buzzing in an unnerving chorus. Each one was the size of a small bird, their bodies sleek, dark, and glistening in the firelight. They were a nightmare made real — pale, translucent wings with veins pulsating beneath them, and bloodshot eyes that glowed faintly with malice.

The elder man and the older woman charged at the mosquitoes, shouting as they swung their weapons, but their movements were slow. The mosquitoes darted around them, their speed far surpassing any human could manage. Their razor-sharp proboscises shot out like deadly spears, drawing blood in mere seconds.

The elder man swung his rod, but a mosquito dodged it effortlessly and sank its needle-thin proboscis into his neck. Blood poured out in a steady stream, too quickly for him to react. The woman fared slightly better, but her strikes were also too slow. She caught one of them on the wing, but another one zipped behind her and drove its needle into her side.

Kael’s heart raced. He couldn’t let them die like this.

**[Iris: 2 Mosquitoes remain. Analyzing...]**

Kael moved quickly, his legs pushing him toward the nearest mosquito, spear raised.

But then, something unexpected happened.

The cat, which had been eerily still on his shoulder, sprang into action. In a blur of motion, it leapt from Kael’s shoulder and into the air, its claws outstretched. The first mosquito didn’t even have time to react as the cat’s claws raked across its wings, tearing through its delicate membrane. The creature’s body dropped to the ground, twitching.

But the cat didn’t stop there.

With eerie precision, it stalked the remaining mosquitoes, slashing them to pieces with ruthless efficiency. Kael watched, stunned, as the cat’s claws sliced through the insects’ fragile exteriors like a hot knife through butter.

The cat was no longer just a strange companion — it was a silent executioner, moving like a shadow, its claws drenched in blood.

As the last mosquito fell, Kael saw the cat’s eyes glow faintly, its body covered in blood, its claws slick and dripping. It stood motionless for a moment, then turned toward Kael.

Its movements were fluid, almost predatory. The cat wasn’t a creature to be trifled with.

The rest of the group, now slowly recovering from the shock, looked on in awe, confusion, and fear. The elder man was the first to speak.

“What in the world...?”

Kael’s voice was tight, but he could only manage a single, breathless sentence.

“It’s my cat.”

**Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 80% Healing

**Cat’s Physical Report**

* **Strength:** 4.505x Average Human
* **Speed:** 8.24x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.015 seconds
* **Stamina:** 5.305x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 3.005x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.215x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 5.005x Average Human

With the last mosquito’s body crumpled at their feet, the camp fell silent, the only sounds now the crackling fire and the distant hum of the wind. The cat stood motionless in the center, its bloodied claws gleaming in the light.

Kael’s mind raced. What kind of creature had he saved?

And more importantly… what was he becoming?

**Chapter 10: The Silent Savior**

The night was still, too still. The remnants of the battle with the mutated mosquitoes hung in the air, a lingering tension that made every breath feel heavier. Kael stood motionless, his spear gripped tightly in his hand, but his focus was on the cat. The creature, covered in the blood of the monsters it had slain, slowly padded toward him, its eyes gleaming in the dim light of the campfire.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the silence between them almost oppressive. Kael’s mind raced with questions — questions he had no answers to. What was this creature? How had it become so powerful? And most importantly, why had it chosen him?

The cat, almost as if it sensed his thoughts, slowly leapt onto his shoulder, its claws gently digging into his skin as it settled there. Kael didn't flinch. He merely stared at the cat, his thoughts swirling.

The rest of the group watched from a distance, eyes wide with fear and awe. The two older men who had fought the mosquitoes were now silent, their faces pale and filled with uncertainty. The young woman, who had been so brave just moments ago, stood frozen, her hands trembling at her sides. But it was the middle schooler, the young girl, who finally broke the silence.

"Did it… save us?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kael blinked, his mind snapping back to reality. The others seemed to hold their breath, waiting for his response. The fear in their eyes was palpable, but there was something else there now — a flicker of gratitude. Perhaps they saw the cat as a savior, something they could no longer fear now that it had saved their lives. Kael nodded slowly, his voice soft but steady.

"Yes. It did," he replied, his gaze locked on the cat. "It’s… not what you think. But it helped us. All of us."

The group stood in silence for a moment longer, but the tension seemed to lift. Slowly, they began to pack up their belongings, their movements deliberate and careful. The battle with the mosquitoes had rattled them more than they cared to admit. They knew they couldn’t stay here much longer.

"We need to move," the elder man said, his voice low but firm. "This place is no longer safe."

Kael nodded, feeling the weight of his own exhaustion settling in. He could still feel the sting of the lacerations on his shoulder, the wounds from the mutated rat. He wasn’t healed, not fully, but he had to keep going. They all did.

They moved out of the ruined camp slowly, cautiously, as though every sound could be their last. Kael kept his eyes peeled, the cat perched silently on his shoulder, ever watchful. The others stayed close, their eyes darting around, their steps quick and light.

The journey was uneventful at first, but Kael couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching them. The landscape had changed drastically over the last few months. What had once been vibrant, full of life, was now a desolate wasteland of broken buildings, twisted metal, and crumbling roads. But even in this ruin, there was a place Kael had been hoping to reach — an old AI-powered library, built for the elderly, designed as a sanctuary for those who loved culture and knowledge. It was a place he knew would offer the most protection, even if it had been unused for some time.

As they reached the outskirts of the library, Kael took a moment to scan the area. The library loomed ahead, its tall glass windows now cracked and covered in grime, but the structure was intact. The AI system was still active, but no one had used it for a long time.

The group stood in front of the massive doors, their heavy, ancient bronze handles tarnished and covered in dust. The once grand entrance was now barely visible beneath the layer of dirt and debris.

"This is it," Kael said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The elder man nodded, looking up at the building with a mix of hope and hesitation. "It looks safe. But… be cautious."

Kael pushed the door open slowly, its ancient hinges creaking under the strain. Inside, the dim glow of AI-powered lights flickered on automatically, casting long shadows across the room. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with dusty tomes and old records. The air was stale, untouched for far too long.

But it wasn’t completely empty.

Kael scanned the room with Iris, but the AI only showed vague details of the interior. It was clear that this library was long abandoned, but the danger wasn’t just in the silence. The walls seemed to hum with an unspoken tension, as though something had been waiting here — something Kael couldn’t yet see.

"Stay close," he warned, turning to the group. "We don’t know what’s here. The AI system might still be active, but there could be other threats lurking."

They moved cautiously through the aisles, the cat remaining eerily still on Kael’s shoulder, its eyes darting around the room, alert. As Kael walked deeper into the library, he felt a strange presence — something that didn’t belong.

The library, once a place of culture, was now a tomb of forgotten knowledge.

**Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 85% Healing

**Cat’s Physical Report**

* **Strength:** 4.505x Average Human
* **Speed:** 8.24x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.015 seconds
* **Stamina:** 5.305x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 3.005x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.215x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 5.005x Average Human

They continued through the library, the tension growing with each step. They were safe for now, but Kael couldn’t shake the feeling that danger was just around the corner.

Something wasn’t right.

But for now, they had no choice but to stay.

**Chapter 11:**

As the group settled in the quiet, dimly lit AI-powered library, their weary minds began to ease, if only for a brief moment. Kael and the others had come across a collection of ancient adventure books, relics from the past century that told stories of humankind's greatest achievements—from the rise of space travel to humanity's technological advancements. Each page was a reminder of the time before everything had collapsed. Their fingers skimmed through the pages with a mix of awe and melancholy.

But as they read, the environment around them slowly shifted. The air seemed to grow thicker, a faint greenish hue spreading across the walls. At first, it was subtle, like the early signs of something blooming. But then, as their gazes wandered to the windows and doorways, they noticed it—the tree branches. They had grown in, stretching out like long tendrils, reaching towards them.

Kael’s heart skipped a beat. The branches twisted around the corners of the library, moving as if alive. His breath caught in his throat as he realized the horrifying truth: these were no ordinary branches.

“Is that…?” Victor’s voice trailed off, his hands trembling.

“M-Mutated trees?” Emily stammered, her eyes wide with terror.

Kael looked around, his instincts kicking in. “We need to get out of here. Those trees are alive, and they’re dangerous.”

But as he moved to grab his spear, the first of the branches shot forward, coiling tightly around Emily and David. They screamed, struggling in the grip of the growing branches, their movements futile against the unyielding strength of the tree.

“Help!” Emily cried, her voice strained as the branches lifted her off the ground.

David, gasping for air, fought against the tightening vines, but the branches grew faster, tighter, stronger with each passing second.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. His hand instinctively went to the spear, but the reality of the situation hit him—destroying the tree might be their only chance.

“Everyone, move!” Kael shouted, his voice breaking through the panic.

Victor and Samuel stepped forward, their weapons raised, ready to strike. Maya and Ethan rushed to help, but it was clear: time was running out.

Kael's mind raced as he strategized the best way to sever the branches, but before any of them could act, the library filled with a sudden, eerie hum. The branches tightened their grip, and the sounds of distant growls echoed through the halls.

As the battle began to unfold, Kael fought to free his friends—but it seemed the trees had only begun their attack.

The next steps would determine whether they could survive, or if they would become another part of the growing forest of terror.

**Chapter 12:**

The air in the library had turned heavy, a sense of impending doom washing over the group as the monstrous mutated tree tightened its grip on Emily and David, lifting them higher into the air. The tree’s branches, pulsating with a sinister energy, had become more than just a threat—they were now the enemy.

**IRIS, Kael's ever-present companion, scanned the tree, delivering its unsettling report with cold precision:**

**🧬** **Tree Mutation Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength**: 5x Average Human
* **Speed**: 7x Average Human
* **Defensive Capability**: Extreme
* **Mutation Level**: 10 (Catastrophic Growth)

Kael’s heart raced as he watched the tree’s massive branches sway with unnatural grace, its strength far beyond anything he had faced before. The others were not far behind, already charging toward the tree’s base with weapons drawn. Victor, Samuel, and Maya wasted no time, each of them moving with grim determination. They swung through the air, their weapons slicing through the branches, but they were met with fierce resistance.

Kael’s eyes locked with Cherry—the cat who had saved them all. “Come on,” Kael muttered, his voice steady despite the chaos. He felt a strange bond with the creature now, one built through shared survival. “Let’s end this.”

The two of them rushed forward, navigating the shifting landscape of writhing branches and swinging tendrils. The cat, agile and swift, leaped from branch to branch, guiding Kael with its keen instincts. Together, they moved like a coordinated force—Kael with his spear, and Cherry with her razor-sharp claws.

As they neared the base of the tree, Kael could see that the trunk was thick—far thicker than anything he could cut through. The mutations had made it nearly indestructible, but they had no choice. They had to reach David and Emily before it was too late.

David and Emily were high in the air, struggling against the tree's unrelenting grip. Their faces were pale, terror etched in their expressions as they dangled helplessly from the branches. Kael's pulse quickened.

“Hold on, we’re coming!” Kael shouted, as Cherry leapt from his shoulder to claw at the branches holding Emily.

With every swipe, Kael and Cherry managed to cut through the branches, slowly but surely freeing their friends. After a few more agonizing moments of struggle, they reached the base of the trunk.

But the tree was far more powerful than anticipated. Every strike from their weapons only seemed to slow it down for a moment. Still, they persisted. Victor swung his axe with all his might, and Maya sliced through branches, creating just enough space for Kael and the others to move.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they managed to free Emily and David. But just as they began to retreat, the tree reacted—more violently than ever before. The air hummed with energy, and before they could fully escape, the tree’s branches shot out, capturing Kael and Cherry in a sudden, horrifying twist.

The others screamed as Kael was pulled toward the ground. The earth trembled beneath him, the tree’s power dragging him into the depths of the earth, vanishing from sight. Cherry, too, was pulled into the ground, her claws unable to hold onto Kael as she was swallowed by the earth.

The others were left standing in shock, their hearts racing with fear. They had watched in horror as the tree, alive with its own sinister will, dragged Kael and the cat into the darkness, leaving them behind without a trace.

Victor, Samuel, Maya, and the others could only stare, helpless, not knowing what had just happened, or if they could ever find Kael again. The tree’s actions felt almost… intentional, as though it knew exactly what it was doing.

**Chapter 13: The Tree's Prison**

Kael’s vision was blurry when he woke up, his body sore and disoriented. His mind struggled to piece together what had happened. The last thing he remembered was the tree—its massive branches engulfing him and dragging him into the ground. Now, he found himself in an entirely different place.

He slowly pushed himself to his feet, wincing as pain shot through his shoulders. The cat, Cherry, lay not far from him, looking equally battered but not as badly injured. She seemed to be recovering, her claws still sharp, but her movements were slow.

The environment around them was unlike anything Kael had ever encountered. He was surrounded by thick tree bark—massive, gnarled walls rising high above him. The air was stifling, and the ground beneath him was rocky and uneven, with patches of moss growing in strange patterns.

But there was something more unsettling about the place. It was completely still, devoid of life beyond himself and Cherry. The entire space felt as though it was encased in some kind of dome. The sky above was hidden by a thick, organic canopy made of intertwined branches. It was as if he was trapped inside the very heart of the tree itself.

He stood there, unsure of what to do. His spear, his only weapon, was nowhere to be found. He could feel a rising sense of panic, but he fought it back. Panicking wouldn’t help him escape.

Kael took a deep breath and pulled out his wristwatch, activating the AI, IRIS. His fingers shook slightly as he used his only remaining tool to scan the surroundings.

**IRIS Scan Results:**

🧬 **Location Analysis:**

* **Environment Type:** Inside of Mutated Tree
* **Tree Bark Density:** 550x Average Human
* **Energy Output:** 500x Average Human
* **Threat Level:** 50-Star Danger (Ancient Creature-Level Threat)

The scan results sent a cold shiver down Kael’s spine. The numbers were staggering. This was no ordinary tree—it had evolved far beyond any living thing Kael had encountered. The tree was now classified as an "ancient creature," a being whose power far surpassed the human level. A 50-star threat was nothing short of apocalyptic.

He took a moment to process the information. How could this tree have become so powerful? And why had it only captured him?

His mind raced with questions. The tree, which had seemed weak and defenseless at first, had now turned into a prison—a place where he was the sole prisoner. It had been after him all along, but why?

A sudden noise broke his concentration. He turned to see Cherry cautiously approaching a small plant that had sprouted near the center of the dome. The plant was strange—its leaves were a deep violet, and a small, glowing fruit hung from a twisted stem. It radiated a soft, eerie light, and the scent it gave off was faintly sweet but unsettling.

Next to the plant, scratched into the rocky ground, was a note. Kael bent down to examine it, his fingers trembling. The note was written in what appeared to be crude marks, scrawled by something sharp—likely made by the tree or one of its mutated branches. It was simple, direct:

*"Eat it if you want to escape."*

Kael stared at the note, his heart racing. He didn’t know whether to trust the message. The tree had already shown it could manipulate him, but the idea of staying trapped here forever was unbearable.

What if the fruit was poisoned? What if it was another trap?

But the thought of being trapped here forever, surrounded by nothing but the oppressive walls of the mutated tree, made him hesitate. He looked at Cherry, who seemed to sense his uncertainty. The cat let out a low growl, but it too seemed to be drawn to the plant.

Kael knew he had to make a decision.

He scanned the fruit with IRIS to check for any hidden dangers. The AI provided the following analysis:

**IRIS Scan Results:**

🧬 **Fruit Analysis:**

* **Nutritional Value:** Unknown
* **Toxicity:** None Detected
* **Properties:** Potentially linked to the tree's life force
* **Escape Potential:** Unclear

The scan didn’t offer much help. There was no immediate sign of toxicity, but the fruit seemed to be linked to the tree's life force. Could it be the key to escaping this place?

Kael reached for the fruit, the cold weight of uncertainty pressing on his chest. He knew he had no choice. He had to take the risk.

With a deep breath, he plucked the fruit from the plant and held it in his hand. It was surprisingly light, the skin smooth and almost pulsating with energy. He glanced at Cherry, who had stopped moving, watching him closely.

"I don’t know if this is a good idea, Cherry," Kael whispered, but he already knew what had to be done. He took a small bite.

At first, there was nothing. The taste was faint, almost flavorless, and Kael felt no immediate change. But then, as the fruit slid down his throat, a warm sensation spread through his body, and the world around him seemed to shift. The walls of the dome pulsated, as if the entire tree was reacting to the presence of the fruit inside him.

Suddenly, Kael's body went rigid, his muscles tensing as if they were being pulled in multiple directions at once. His vision blurred, and for a moment, he felt weightless—like he was floating in an endless void.

But then, as quickly as it had begun, it stopped. Kael found himself standing once again in the dome, his body trembling. The world around him seemed to have shifted—there was a faint glow in the air, and the tree bark now seemed less oppressive, more... alive.

Was this the tree's way of helping him escape, or had he just walked right into another trap?

Kael’s mind raced as the silence settled once more. He couldn’t be sure. But now, there was no turning back. He had to find a way out, no matter what it took. The answers lay ahead, and Kael knew he would have to face them head-on.

**Chapter 14: The Mutation**

Kael slowly finished the remaining fruit, his hands trembling as he bit down on it. The taste was bitterer than the first, but he forced himself to swallow. At first, nothing happened. He stood there in the eerie silence, expecting some immediate change, but nothing seemed to shift. He began walking forward, pushing himself to keep moving, despite the nagging feeling in the back of his mind that something was wrong.

However, just as he took another step, pain surged through his body like a flood, overwhelming him. His muscles twisted and burned, his bones felt like they were being crushed under immense pressure. His mind screamed in agony as his cells felt like they were tearing apart and reforming at a rapid pace.

Kael fell to his knees, clutching his head in a desperate attempt to hold onto his sanity as the pain intensified. His body convulsed violently, and the agony reached a peak so intense that his vision blurred, and he lost consciousness. The last thing he heard before blacking out was the soft, worried growl of Cherry, and then... nothing.

When Kael finally awoke, everything felt strange. The world around him was blurry at first, and his body felt heavy—almost alien to him. He groggily sat up, groaning as his head swam. The plant he had eaten earlier was now a withered, dry husk, its leaves curled and brittle. Cherry, however, was licking the dried remains, as if savoring whatever remnants of energy or sustenance the plant might have left behind.

Kael's muscles still burned, but the pain had dulled to a sharp throb that was almost bearable. He tried to move, but his limbs felt sluggish and stiff, like he was learning to walk all over again.

"Iris," he whispered hoarsely, still in a daze, "scan me. I need to know what happened."

A few moments passed, and then IRIS responded.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

**🧬** **Physical Status Report:**

* **Strength:** 8.905x Average Human
* **Speed:** 7.231x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds (Faster than Cherry)
* **Stamina:** 8.245x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 5.3x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.004x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Neural Evolution:** 4.5x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 15x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Minor Healing (No significant injuries remaining)
* **Cat (Cherry) Report:**  
  + **Strength:** 2.7x Average Human
  + **Speed:** 5.1x Average Human
  + **Reflex Time:** 0.09 seconds (Slightly increased)
  + **Mutation Rate:** 2.5x Average Human (Minor Increase)

Kael stared at the results, his heart racing in disbelief. The numbers were staggering. His strength had nearly tripled, and his speed had increased by more than seven times that of an average human. His reflex time was now faster than Cherry’s—his cat, who had once been faster than him. His mutation rate was off the charts, and the rapid changes were impossible to ignore.

Kael struggled to comprehend what had just happened. This mutation had taken him far beyond what he had imagined. But why? Why had the tree only targeted him, and why had it left Cherry almost unchanged, aside from minor improvements?

He was still processing the full scope of his transformation when a thought gripped him: **What now?**

He pushed himself to his feet, despite the stiffness in his muscles, and took in his surroundings. It was eerily quiet. The same walls of bark surrounded him, the same oppressive silence hanging heavy in the air.

Kael growled in frustration and anger, his voice echoing through the dome-like prison. "Why are you still keeping me locked up?!" he shouted, his words tinged with disbelief. "What do you want from me?!"

For a long moment, there was no answer—only the faint rustling of the tree’s twisted branches. Kael stood there, staring at the walls, his fists clenched. He was done waiting. He was done being the tree’s puppet.

But just as he was about to give in to his rage, the ground beneath him began to tremble.

The vibrations started faintly, like distant footsteps, but they grew rapidly in intensity. Kael staggered back, his eyes wide with fear as the tremors became violent, shaking the very earth around him. Before he could react, the ground cracked open beneath him, sending him tumbling down into a vast chasm.

He barely managed to catch himself on the edge of a cliff, peering over the edge to see the new area below.

The space stretched out before him, far larger than any cavern he had ever seen. The walls were jagged and towering, extending upward for hundreds of meters—an expanse that seemed to go on endlessly. The area resembled the interior of an enormous, ancient tree, but this was far more advanced, far more menacing. The walls were covered in thick green and red bark, which seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy, and the ground was uneven, strewn with large, tangled roots and vines. Yellow leaves swirled in the air, their color a stark contrast to the deep, blood-like hue of the bark.

Kael’s heart raced as he felt the presence of something far more dangerous than he had anticipated.

The tremors grew worse. A massive shape began to emerge from the depths of the cavern. Slowly, a towering structure rose from the center of the chamber, far larger than anything Kael had ever seen before. It was a colossal tree—its trunk thick and twisted, with bark that gleamed like polished armor. Its branches stretched out like the claws of a giant creature, and its leaves, yellow and brilliant, seemed to glow faintly in the darkness.

This was no ordinary tree. This was something ancient, something with a consciousness all its own. Kael’s breath caught in his throat as the realization hit him: the tree wasn’t just alive. It was alive in a way that was beyond anything Kael had ever experienced. And it had brought him here for a reason.

He could feel its power, its ancient hunger, and its presence pressing down on him like a weight.

And for the first time since this nightmare began, Kael felt a true fear in his chest.

The ground trembled once more, and Kael took a step back, ready for whatever was coming next. But deep down, he knew that this was only the beginning. The tree’s true form was now revealed, and Kael was at its mercy.

And he had no idea what it wanted from him—or why it had chosen him in the first place.

**Chapter 15: The Awakening of the Protectors**

Kael stood frozen, his body trembling with both fear and confusion. The giant tree before him was no longer just a mutated plant—it was something far older, far more ancient than he could ever have imagined. His heart pounded in his chest as he scanned it with IRIS, hoping to make sense of what was happening.

However, what appeared on his display was beyond comprehension.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Tree - Ancient Protector:**

* **Strength:** Unmeasurable
* **Speed:** Unmeasurable
* **Defense:** Unmeasurable
* **Danger Level:** Infinite Stars (Indeterminate)
* **Mutation Rate:** Cosmic-level
* **Description:** A being of the ancient world, its true nature cannot be fully understood by human technology. It has transcended known limits of organic life, existing in a form beyond current human comprehension. It is a protector—an ancient entity tied to the fate of this land and its inhabitants.

The scan results left Kael speechless. **Infinite stars**? He had never seen anything like this. The values were beyond anything that could be quantified, far surpassing the strongest mutations he had encountered so far. This was a being of unimaginable power, something that didn’t belong to this world as Kael knew it.

Suddenly, a deafening sound erupted from the tree. It wasn’t a crack or a roar, but a deep, resonant voice, emanating from the very bark of the tree, so loud that it shook the ground beneath Kael’s feet.

**"It seems you are the one after all."**

Kael staggered back, the voice echoing in his skull. It wasn’t just a sound—this was a presence, a command, a declaration.

He swallowed hard, trying to steady himself as his body tensed. "What do you mean?" Kael asked, his voice strained with a mix of fear and curiosity.

The voice, deep and rumbling, responded with a chilling certainty:  
**"The one who unites us to go forth for the battle that awaits us."**

Kael frowned, his heart racing. "What battle are you talking about?" he demanded, a sense of urgency creeping into his voice. The ground trembled again, this time less violently, but still enough to make his knees shake.

The tree’s voice was heavy with a history Kael couldn’t grasp. **"The battle that descends from the heavens, the one you humans have forgotten, the one that awakened us."**

Kael’s head spun as he tried to process the words. "You mean… us humans woke you up? What do you mean by descending from space?"

The tree’s voice deepened, its tone almost sorrowful. **"You humans were never a threat. We awoke on our own, long before your kind ever existed. To face an ordeal greater than any you can imagine. But because of this, only the qualified humans who survive the mutation are worthy to stand with us, to face the future. They are the ones who will protect this land."**

Kael’s chest tightened. This was more than he could comprehend. The words didn’t make sense. "You mean to say that it wasn’t us humans who awakened you? That it’s not our fault this all happened?"

The tree paused, the air growing thick with tension. **"No. You did not awaken us. You were merely… a catalyst. We were already here, waiting, dormant beneath the surface. You humans are but a part of this world’s great cycle. You are not the ones who stirred us, but you will be the ones to help us face what is to come."**

Kael’s mind raced. Everything he thought he knew was now turned upside down. The mutations, the cataclysmic events, the apocalyptic shift—they weren’t caused by humans after all. **Something else** was coming, something beyond the human understanding of time and space.

The tree’s voice spoke again, its words carrying the weight of eons. **"What descends from the heavens is no mere storm. It is a force from the outer realms, a force that seeks to destroy this world, to strip it of its life. We, the ancient protectors, were created to defend against such forces. But we cannot do it alone. The mutated ones—those who survive, who possess the strength to endure the transformation—will be the ones to fight alongside us. Only then can we hope to protect this land from the coming destruction."**

Kael's breath hitched. **The coming destruction.** His hands clenched into fists as the realization hit him. The mutations, the deadly creatures, the strange changes happening in the world—it was all connected. Something catastrophic was looming, something beyond his comprehension.

"And why me?" Kael asked, the words bitter in his throat. "Why am I the one you chose? Why did you target me?"

The tree’s voice was quiet, almost cryptic now. **"You were the one who survived, Kael. You were the one who fought. You are a part of the change, part of the evolution that will bring about the new age. You are the one who will unite us, who will lead the charge. The battle is yours as much as it is ours."**

Kael stood there, his mind racing with questions, but all he could hear was the unrelenting hum of the tree's voice in his skull. **The battle.** **The protectors.** **The destruction from the heavens.** He was a part of something much larger than himself, and it terrified him.

The tree shifted, its massive roots slowly pulling from the ground as though preparing for something monumental. **"Prepare yourself, Kael,"** the voice echoed. **"The battle approaches. The land is changing, and you will be at the center of it. There is no turning back."**

Kael took a deep breath, his body still aching from the transformation, his mind spinning with everything he had learned. There was no choice now. The world was changing, and he was right in the middle of it. He could either fight or be destroyed.

With a mixture of fear and determination, Kael stepped forward, his voice low but resolute. "I will fight. For whatever it is we have to face, I will fight."

The tree’s voice seemed to pulse with approval. **"Good. You are ready. The time is almost upon us."**

Kael nodded, though uncertainty still gripped his heart. He didn’t know what he was about to face, but he knew one thing for certain: The battle was coming. And he would have to fight, not just for his survival, but for the future of everything he knew.

**Chapter 16: The Call to Strength**

The world around Kael shifted once again, the once-familiar light of day now replaced by a sudden, overwhelming darkness. He blinked rapidly, his vision struggling to adjust as the dim, eerie atmosphere pressed down on him. Cherry, still resting peacefully on his shoulder, seemed unaffected by the change, her small form nestled into his neck as though she had been there for hours.

Kael stood up, his body aching from the lingering effects of his transformation. The words of the tree, or the protector, still echoed in his mind: **"Become strong, the child who unites."** His breath hitched slightly at the thought. What did it mean? What was his role in all of this?

He scanned his surroundings, trying to make sense of the situation. The ground beneath him was cracked, the buildings around him crumbling, and the air thick with an ominous silence. It was a wasteland—a far cry from the AI-powered library he had just escaped. The city seemed abandoned, devoid of life, save for the distant sounds of something shifting in the shadows.

Kael’s IRIS system flickered on, and a soft beep indicated that his scanner had connected. As he surveyed the area, his display blinked with new data:

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Environment - Abandoned City Zone:**

* **Danger Level:** 2-3 Stars
* **Monsters Present:**  
  + **2 Stars:** 20-30x Average Human
  + **3 Stars:** 30-50x Average Human
* **Description:** This part of the city has been overrun by monstrous entities, with mutations more aggressive and dangerous than anything Kael has faced so far. These creatures possess significant power and speed, far exceeding human capabilities. Survival here will require preparation, strategy, and careful execution.

Kael's heart rate spiked as the data processed in his mind. **Monsters nearly 30 times stronger than humans.** This wasn’t going to be an easy fight. He had no weapons, no gear, and no clear idea of how to proceed. But he knew one thing for certain: **He needed to prepare.**

With a grunt of frustration, Kael set his jaw. **Survival** was his first priority.

**Step 1: Finding Supplies**

Kael took a deep breath and looked around. His first task was to locate any equipment, weapons, or supplies that might help him survive in this hellish landscape. He had no choice but to venture deeper into the city and scavenge.

He spotted a ruined building in the distance—a former store, perhaps. Its structure was half-collapsed, but it might still have something useful inside. Moving cautiously, Kael threaded his way through the debris, keeping his senses sharp and on high alert. His body still felt the effects of his recent mutation, but it also felt stronger, faster, more capable than before.

As he entered the building, he spotted a few scattered remnants of equipment—old, rusted tools, a couple of broken weapons, and discarded pieces of clothing. **Nothing useful**, he thought grimly. But he wasn't ready to give up. His eyes fell upon a workbench in the corner. There were materials there—scrap metal, wire, and broken tools. **With these, he could forge a weapon.**

Kael’s fingers worked quickly, gathering the pieces and examining what he had. He needed a new spear, something sharp and strong enough to take on the monstrous creatures that roamed these streets. Using his enhanced strength and speed, he began assembling what he could from the scraps, carefully welding metal pieces together and sharpening edges with a rusted tool.

After what felt like hours, Kael finally stood back, inspecting his work. The spear wasn’t perfect, but it would do for now. It was sturdy, well-balanced, and most importantly, **sharp**. He could already feel the weight of it in his hands, the metal seeming to hum with potential.

**Step 2: Scavenging for Daily Necessities**

The next priority was food and supplies. Kael knew that if he was going to survive in this new, hostile environment, he would need more than just weapons. He needed provisions. He moved quickly from building to building, searching through abandoned shops and homes. Most places had been picked clean long ago, but after a while, he found a few cans of preserved food and bottles of water tucked away in a broken-down grocery store. They were old, but they would sustain him for a time.

He also found some makeshift clothing, a jacket, and sturdy boots that were still in decent condition. Kael didn’t waste any time—he stuffed the food and supplies into a small bag and made sure his spear was securely fastened to his side.

**Step 3: Preparing for the Future**

With his new gear in hand, Kael paused to take a deep breath. He wasn’t ready to face the monstrous creatures just yet. He still needed to learn more about his own body—his new abilities—and figure out how to use them to his advantage.

**Kael checked his IRIS system again, this time scanning his own body to get a better sense of what had changed since his transformation. The report came in quickly:**

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Mutation Status:**

* **Strength:** 9.005x Average Human
* **Speed:** 7.105x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.03 seconds
* **Mutation Rate:** 15 (Severe)
* **Attributes:**  
  + **Enhanced Vision**: Sharper eyesight, capable of detecting movement at greater distances.
  + **Muscle Density**: Increased by 5, providing greater power output for physical activities.
  + **Neural Processing Speed:** 2.9x faster than before, improving reaction times and cognitive abilities.
  + **Stamina:** 7.5x that of an average human, allowing for prolonged physical exertion without fatigue.

Kael took in the information, his mind racing. He had become stronger, faster, and more resilient. But his mutation was severe. He wasn’t sure what that meant in the long run, but it was clear he had crossed a line. His body was no longer entirely human. Still, the increased strength and speed were undeniable.

Kael adjusted the strap of his new weapon and began moving toward the outskirts of the city. There was no time to waste. The monsters in this area were dangerous, and Kael had a feeling that they wouldn’t stay dormant for long. He needed to be ready, and he needed to find others—if there were any survivors left.

**The world had changed,** and Kael had to adapt. **Fast.**

With Cherry still on his shoulder, Kael took his first steps into the unknown, the sounds of distant creatures echoing in the darkness ahead.

**Chapter 17: Battle with the Mutated Rat**

Kael moved cautiously through the ruined cityscape, the remnants of shattered buildings casting long shadows in the dim light of the overcast sky. The air was thick with tension, and his senses were heightened as he moved forward, every crack of rubble underfoot amplifying the silence that surrounded him. The rustling sound of something shifting in the distance caught his attention, a slight movement just beyond the horizon. He halted, instinctively gripping his newly crafted spear.

Cherry, his trusted companion, stirred slightly on his shoulder, her senses as sharp as his own. Her body remained still, her fur bristling as she peered into the shadows. Kael’s heart raced. He knew that the mutated creatures in this city weren’t just dangerous—they were unpredictable. The ones he had encountered so far were quick, vicious, and relentless.

From the edge of the debris, a pair of glowing red eyes appeared, followed by a low, guttural growl. A mutated rat, larger than any ordinary rodent, emerged from the shadows. Its fur was matted and slick with some kind of oily substance, its body bulging with unnatural muscles. The creature’s teeth were elongated, sharp like daggers, and its claws scraped against the concrete as it inched forward. Its body seemed to radiate a sickly greenish hue, the telltale sign of mutation.

The creature’s movements were erratic, a strange, twitchy aggression that indicated how far it had been altered from its original form. Kael could see its jaw twitching as it sniffed the air, sensing the presence of prey.

He felt his muscles tense in response, the new weight of the spear feeling natural in his hands. **This was no ordinary rat.**

Cherry’s fur bristled even more, and her claws dug into his shoulder as if preparing for the impending battle. Kael focused on the rat, keeping his distance, watching for any sudden moves. His enhanced vision, thanks to his mutation, allowed him to track the creature’s every movement with a heightened sense of clarity. **It was fast,** he thought, but it was also reckless, its aggression more apparent than its intelligence.

The rat pounced suddenly, its massive claws slashing through the air as it leaped toward Kael. With lightning reflexes, Kael sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the rat’s strike. His body moved faster than it ever had before, a blur of motion as he twisted out of the way. But the rat was already repositioning itself, snapping its jaws at him, trying to sink its teeth into his flesh.

Kael spun the spear in his hand, thrusting it out at the rat’s face. The creature let out a shriek as the tip of the spear pierced its shoulder, but it quickly twisted its body, knocking the spear aside with a powerful swipe of its claws. The sheer force of the blow sent Kael stumbling back, but his enhanced stamina allowed him to recover almost instantly.

He realized that the rat was only getting angrier, more desperate with each failed strike. It was more dangerous than he had initially anticipated. Its claws and teeth were sharp enough to tear through flesh, and its strength was formidable. But Kael was no longer an ordinary human. His reflexes were quicker, and his strength had grown immensely since the mutation.

He gripped the spear tighter, focusing on the creature’s movements. The rat lunged at him again, its mouth wide open as it prepared to bite. This time, Kael was ready. He sidestepped with precision, and as the rat’s mouth snapped shut behind him, he thrust his spear forward with all his might. The spear’s tip drove deep into the rat’s side, piercing through its mutated ribs with a sickening crunch. The rat let out a terrible screech, its body jerking violently as it tried to break free.

But Kael didn’t let go. With a grim determination, he twisted the spear, digging it deeper into the creature’s body. The rat’s blood—dark and viscous—began to spill out, coating the spear in a layer of gore. It struggled for a few more seconds, its strength fading with each passing moment. Finally, with a guttural wheeze, the mutated rat collapsed, its body twitching for the last time before going still.

Kael stood over the beast, his chest heaving with exertion, sweat dripping from his brow. His enhanced senses picked up the faint smell of the rat’s blood in the air, and something primal stirred within him. **He had done it.** The fight had been intense, but it was far from over. He could still feel the effects of the battle in his body, but he knew one thing for certain: he had come a long way from the scared, vulnerable human he had been just days ago.

Cherry jumped off Kael’s shoulder, landing lightly on the ground beside the dead rat. Her eyes gleamed with excitement, and she darted forward, sniffing at the carcass. Kael watched her carefully. He had noticed that the cat seemed to thrive in these violent environments, her instincts and abilities sharper than ever. Her mutation, while subtle compared to his own, had undoubtedly made her a stronger ally.

Kael knelt down, his fingers brushing the rat’s fur. He couldn’t waste the opportunity. This creature had been a significant challenge, and he needed to make sure it would serve a purpose. With a swift motion, he cut into the rat’s belly using the tip of his spear, carefully extracting the meat. He didn’t have the luxury of preparing the meat properly, but he knew that consuming it could help him gain strength.

He glanced over at Cherry, who had already begun licking at the rat’s bloodied fur. She was faster than usual, more focused. **She had already been affected by the mutation.**

Kael took a deep breath and tore off a small piece of the rat’s meat, biting into it. The taste was bitter and foul, but his stomach churned with hunger. As he swallowed, he felt an immediate rush of energy, a surge of warmth flooding through his body. It was as if the meat had given him a new vitality, sharpening his senses even more.

His IRIS system blinked to life, scanning his body and analyzing the changes.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Strength:** 9.605x Average Human (Increase: +0.6)
* **Speed:** 7.505x Average Human (Increase: +0.4)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.02 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Stamina:** 7.9x Average Human (Increase: +0.4)
* **Mutation Rate:** 16 (Increase: +1)
* **Neural Processing Speed:** 3.1x faster (Increase: +0.2)

Kael’s body had responded to the mutated rat’s meat. His strength, speed, and stamina had all improved, albeit slightly. But the most noticeable increase was in his reflexes. His reaction time had sharpened further, bringing him closer to the speed of Cherry, who had always been lightning-fast.

Cherry, meanwhile, had taken a bite of the rat’s meat as well, her eyes widening as she seemed to experience a similar surge in power. Her agility increased even more, her movements sharper, more precise. Her sleek fur shimmered slightly, as if her body had adapted to the mutagenic properties of the rat’s flesh.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Cherry - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Speed:** 6.1x Average Human (Increase: +0.2)
* **Agility:** 6.5x Average Human (Increase: +0.3)
* **Strength:** 2.8x Average Human (Increase: +0.1)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Mutation Rate:** 4 (Increase: +1)

Both Kael and Cherry had been enhanced by the meat, each gaining strength, speed, and reflexes. But the experience also left them more mutated—Kael now with a mutation rate of 16 and Cherry at a 4. As they stood over the defeated creature, Kael felt the weight of their new abilities. There was no turning back.

But with this power came the inevitable question: **How much further would their mutations go?**

As Kael wiped the blood from his hands and gathered what he could from the rat’s remains, he knew that this battle was only the beginning. The city was full of these mutated creatures, and he would have to grow even stronger to face the dangers ahead. But for now, he and Cherry had survived, and that was all that mattered.

**Chapter 18: The Battle with the Mutated Pigs**

Kael and Cherry pressed on, each step heavier than the last as they ventured deeper into the heart of the mutated city. The air was thick with the smell of decay, and the sounds of distant growls and shrieks filled the air. The environment around them was both familiar and foreign, as the mutated creatures that had once roamed the land now dominated every corner of the city.

Kael had grown accustomed to the dangers that lay ahead, his senses more attuned to the shifting shadows and subtle sounds of the environment. However, this part of the city was different. The air felt charged, almost as though something enormous was lurking just beyond their reach.

Suddenly, the ground shook beneath their feet, and a deep, guttural grunt echoed through the silence. Kael's instincts flared, and his hand gripped his spear—crafted from the bone of the mutated rat—ready for whatever threat loomed ahead. Cherry, sensing danger, leapt from his shoulder, landing with a soft thud on the ground beside him. Her eyes glowed with an eerie intensity, her body coiled like a spring, ready to spring into action.

From around a crumbling building emerged a pack of five mutated pigs, each one as large as a car. Their massive bodies were covered in matted fur and thick, leathery skin, dotted with patches of jagged scales and scars. Their tusks were enormous, curving outwards like razor-sharp blades, and their eyes glowed with an unnatural yellow hue. The pigs snorted, their nostrils flaring as they sniffed the air, picking up the scent of their potential prey.

Kael felt the weight of the situation sink in. These pigs were no ordinary animals. Their mutation had made them stronger, faster, and more aggressive. It was clear that they would stop at nothing to claim Kael and Cherry as their next meal.

The leader of the pack—a massive boar with a dark, battle-worn hide—charged first, its tusks aimed directly at Kael. His heart raced as he sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the tusks that could easily impale him. With a quick motion, he swung his spear toward the boar’s flank, aiming for a soft spot near its ribs. The spear struck deep, but the boar was unfazed, merely grunting in irritation.

Before Kael could react, one of the other pigs charged from behind, attempting to trample him. He barely managed to duck under its massive body, rolling to the side as the pig's hooves slammed into the ground, sending dust and debris flying.

Cherry, with her newfound agility, darted towards the charging pig, her claws unsheathing as she aimed for its underbelly. She leapt with unnatural precision, raking her claws across the pig's flesh. The creature squealed in pain, but the attack only seemed to make it more enraged.

Kael’s spear flashed again, this time thrusting into the boar’s side, forcing the leader to stagger back. The creature bellowed in anger, swinging its tusks wildly, narrowly missing Kael’s head. He quickly retaliated, aiming for the boar’s neck, but the creature jerked its head back, evading the blow.

The remaining pigs, sensing the threat posed by Kael and Cherry, began to coordinate their attacks, flanking him from all sides. Kael’s enhanced reflexes kicked in, and he spun his spear, parrying a tusk that came from the left while dodging a swipe from one of the pigs on his right. He twisted and thrust the spear, driving it into the side of one of the smaller pigs. The creature squealed in pain and collapsed to the ground, but the others pressed on, undeterred.

Kael’s muscles burned with exertion, but his determination didn’t falter. With a sharp cry, he focused all his strength into a single, powerful strike. He lunged forward, jamming the spear deep into the neck of the boar. The creature howled as blood poured from the wound, its body bucking and thrashing in a final, desperate attempt to fight back.

The remaining pigs hesitated for a moment, as if unsure of what to do. Kael took advantage of the momentary distraction, swinging his spear in a wide arc, cutting down another of the smaller pigs. The leader fell, its life extinguished, and the rest of the pack, realizing they were outmatched, retreated into the shadows.

Kael stood panting, his body slick with sweat and blood. His muscles ached from the battle, but the feeling of victory coursed through his veins. He turned to Cherry, who was already licking the blood off her paws, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. The fight had been intense, but they had come out on top.

**Scan Report – Post-Battle Analysis:**

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Strength:** 10.3x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Speed:** 8.2x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.018 seconds (Increase: +0.002)
* **Stamina:** 8.5x Average Human (Increase: +0.6)
* **Mutation Rate:** 17 (Increase: +1)
* **Neural Processing Speed:** 3.4x faster (Increase: +0.3)

Kael had gained even more strength, speed, and reflex speed after the battle with the mutated pigs. His mutation rate had continued to rise, indicating that his body was adapting rapidly to the constant dangers he faced. His enhanced stamina would allow him to endure longer in future battles, and his reflexes were becoming more finely tuned with each fight.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Cherry - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Speed:** 6.6x Average Human (Increase: +0.5)
* **Agility:** 7.2x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Strength:** 3.1x Average Human (Increase: +0.3)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.04 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Mutation Rate:** 5 (Increase: +1)

Cherry had made impressive gains as well. Her speed and agility had increased significantly, making her even more of an asset in combat. Her strength had also improved slightly, and her reflexes were becoming quicker. The small cat was becoming a formidable partner, one that Kael could rely on in the heat of battle.

Kael and Cherry took a moment to catch their breath, the adrenaline of the fight slowly wearing off. They had survived, but the battle was a reminder of just how dangerous the world had become. There were more mutated creatures out there, each more powerful than the last. Kael knew that they would have to keep getting stronger if they wanted to survive.

After a brief rest, Kael turned his attention to the carcasses of the mutated pigs. He knew that eating the meat would provide him with another surge of strength, just as it had with the mutated rat. He and Cherry began to tear into the meat, the raw flesh giving them both the sustenance they needed to continue their journey.

As Kael chewed the tough meat, he felt a familiar warmth spreading through his body. His muscles seemed to pulse with new energy, and his senses grew sharper. His body was adapting, evolving in ways that he couldn’t fully comprehend.

But one thing was clear: they were becoming stronger. And if they were going to face the challenges ahead, they would need all the strength they could muster.

**Chapter 19: Awakening of Power**

Two weeks passed in a blur of blood, sweat, and relentless struggle.

Kael and Cherry had survived in the heart of the city’s most dangerous zones, where mutated monsters ruled supreme. Every day was a trial. Every night was a test of endurance. They fought, scavenged, hunted, and grew stronger with each passing moment.

Their bodies had adapted — evolved far beyond anything they had once been.

The Kael of today could hardly be recognized compared to the Kael who had first entered the ruins. His muscles had thickened and hardened like steel cords, yet his body remained lean and fluid, optimized for deadly speed. His skin had a slightly tougher, healthier glow — a faint shimmer of mutation energy beneath his flesh. His eyes, once a dull brown, now carried a deep, intense silver hue, and faint patterns like veins of light etched across the back of his hands and neck — marks of the tremendous mutation his body had undergone.

But it was Cherry who had changed the most visibly.

She had grown nearly twice her previous size — now about the size of a small dog — though her form was still elegant and lithe. Her fur had developed beautiful patterns of shifting crimson and gold, woven between patches of hard, glittering scales. Her claws had sharpened into dangerous weapons, and her fangs gleamed under the faintest light. But most astonishing was her mind: Cherry no longer just reacted instinctively; she showed complex emotions — curiosity, excitement, protectiveness — even hints of understanding Kael's words beyond simple commands.

Her golden eyes glowed with fierce intelligence.

Kael often caught himself speaking to her as though she were another human. And strangely, Cherry would respond with chirps, low growls, or tilts of her head, perfectly conveying her thoughts.

**IRIS SCAN REPORT – TWO WEEKS LATER**

**🧬 Kael - Updated Mutation Analysis**

* **Strength: 19.8x Average Human**
* **Speed: 18.2x Average Human**
* **Reflex Time: 0.012 seconds**
* **Stamina: 19.1x Average Human**
* **Mutation Rate: 26**
* **Neural Processing Speed: 5.6x faster**
* **Skin Toughness: Moderate resistance to cutting/slashing attacks**
* **Bone Density: 2.8x Normal Human**
* **Enhanced Vision: Low-light and fast-movement tracking abilities**

**🧬 Cherry - Updated Mutation Analysis**

* **Strength: 7.9x Average Human**
* **Speed: 18.7x Average Human**
* **Agility: 20.3x Average Human**
* **Reflex Time: 0.009 seconds**
* **Mutation Rate: 12**
* **Scale Growth: Partial natural armor (light impact resistance)**
* **Claws & Fangs: Hardened biological weapon-grade density**
* **Cognitive Development: High Emotional and Pre-Linguistic Intelligence**

**Summary of the Past 2 Weeks**

* Mutated Rodents (Common Encounter): Aggressive, swift, but manageable after adaptation.
* Flying Insects (Venomous): Dangerous swarms requiring precision attacks; Kael crafted a net-trap from fibers to catch and burn them.
* Mutated Canines (Wolf-Sized Predators): Battles at night tested endurance and teamwork; several injuries sustained and healed through meat absorption.
* Mutated Boars (Second Encounter): Stronger than the first ones; Kael crafted a reinforced rat-bone armor vest afterward.
* Environmental Hazards: Collapsing structures, unstable ground, acid rainstorms — survival wasn’t only about fighting monsters.

Each day sharpened Kael’s instincts, and Cherry’s abilities bloomed alongside him. They were no longer prey in this world. They were apex survivors in training.

**MONSTER DATABASE – COLLECTED BY IRIS**

| **Name** | **Mutation Rank** | **Danger Level** | **Description** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mutated Rat** | **0.5 Star** | **Low** | **Swarm creatures, fast breeders, small in size but dangerous in packs.** |
| **Venom Fly** | **1 Star** | **Medium** | **Aggressive airborne insects that inject venom upon sting. Often travel in flocks.** |
| **Mutated Boar** | **2 Star** | **High** | **Giant pig-like beasts with armored hides and extreme strength. Very territorial.** |
| **Stalker Wolves** | **2 Star** | **Very High** | **Predatory, coordinated hunters. Fast, smart, and attack weak spots instinctively.** |
| **Scaled Beetle** | **1.5 Star** | **Medium** | **Heavy carapace insects resistant to normal weapons. Weak spots under legs.** |
| **Acid-Spitter Lizard** | **2 Star** | **High** | **Mutant reptile capable of ranged acidic attacks. Avoid direct confrontation.** |
| **Corpse Vines** | **Environmental Hazard** | **Lethal** | **Parasitic plants that strangle and digest living creatures. Weak to fire.** |
| **Blood Fungus Spores** | **Environmental Hazard** | **Lethal** | **Microscopic spores causing hallucinations and paralysis. Burn on sight.** |

Kael closed the monster database window on Iris after reviewing it, his silver eyes narrowing.

The battles had hardened them, but he knew — this was just the beginning.

The words of the ancient tree echoed still in his mind:

"Become strong, child who unites. The battle that descends from the stars has already begun."

He tightened his grip on his newly crafted spear, looking ahead into the fog-filled ruins.  
Cherry growled softly beside him, her golden eyes reflecting a shared determination.

Their story was only just starting.

**Chapter 20: The Awakening of Change**

The ruins were silent, save for the soft sound of wind weaving through the shattered buildings.

Kael trudged forward, Cherry perched alertly on his shoulder. They had just finished scavenging for supplies when suddenly —

**DING!**  
**[IRIS ALERT: IMMEDIATE THREAT DETECTED WITHIN 300 METERS]**

Kael froze.

His muscles tensed instinctively as he dropped into a low crouch. Cherry's golden eyes sharpened, her fur bristling.

Within moments, heavy footsteps — no, thuds — echoed through the air.

From behind a collapsed concrete wall, a monstrous figure emerged.

It was a **cat** — but not any ordinary mutated animal.  
This thing was colossal, nearly **the size of a cow**, its massive muscles rippling under dark metallic fur that shimmered like blades under the pale light.  
Its **eyes burned with a demonic crimson glow**, and its **claws were long, curved, and gleamed like polished scythes**.  
Each movement it made grated against the ground with the sound of metal scraping stone.

IRIS flashed data across Kael’s vision in rapid sequence:

**Target Identified: "Mutated Metalfur Panther"**  
**Danger Level: 2.7 Stars**  
**Strength: Extremely High**  
**Speed: Extremely High**  
**Defense: Very High**  
**Special Traits: Bladed Fur / Iron Claws / Unnatural Agility**

Kael and Cherry exchanged a grim look.  
This wasn’t just another hunt.

**This was survival.**

**The Battle Begins**

The Metalfur Panther lunged first, its massive body moving with terrifying speed for its size.

Kael barely dodged aside as one razor-sharp claw tore a deep gouge into the concrete where he had stood a moment before. He could feel the shockwave of its passing brush against his skin.

"Cherry! Split!" Kael commanded.

Cherry darted away, her agile body slipping through debris like water.

Kael gripped his ratbone spear tightly and counterattacked, aiming for the Panther’s side — but *CLANG!*  
The spear glanced off harmlessly, barely scratching its metallic fur.

Kael’s mind raced. *Its defense is too strong... we need to aim for the weak points.*

The Panther roared — a deep, guttural sound that rattled Kael’s bones — and charged again.

This time, it swiped with both claws.  
Kael rolled under the first strike but took a glancing hit from the second. He felt the pain tear across his left shoulder as his armor cracked.

Cherry leapt onto the beast’s back, biting and clawing furiously at the joints where the metal fur thinned. Her fangs scraped and tore small gaps, but the Panther bucked violently, throwing her off.

"Good job!" Kael muttered, dashing in at the exposed spot.

**THUNK!**  
He drove the spear into the Panther’s shoulder joint, finally piercing the flesh beneath the armor.

The creature shrieked and retaliated with a wild slash, but Kael was already moving, ducking low and slashing at its legs.

Cherry, recovering quickly, attacked again from the side, aiming at the Panther’s eyes.

After a brutal exchange lasting what felt like an eternity — filled with blood, dust, and desperate evasion — the Panther finally staggered, its wounds bleeding dark, viscous blood onto the cracked ground.

With a final coordinated assault, Kael plunged his spear deep into its neck, and Cherry tore into its throat.  
The monster let out one last, gurgling roar before collapsing heavily onto the ground.

**They had won.**

But at a cost — Kael was bleeding from multiple scratches, and Cherry was panting heavily, her side bruised.

**The Aftermath**

After tending to their wounds, Kael quickly set up a small fire.

They carved chunks of the Panther’s meat — its tough hide nearly impossible to cut without Cherry’s claws — and roasted it carefully.

The smell was rich, wild, almost intoxicating.

As they ate, Kael felt the familiar surge of warmth spread through his body — the monster’s power merging with his own, reinforcing his bones, strengthening his muscles.

**IRIS SCAN – POST-MEAL UPDATE**

**🧬 Kael - Mini-Update**

* **Strength:** 21.4x Average Human
* **Speed:** 19.9x Average Human
* **Stamina:** 21.2x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 27

**🧬 Cherry - Mini-Update**

* **Strength:** 9.4x Average Human
* **Speed:** 21.5x Average Human
* **Agility:** 22.7x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 13.5

Kael leaned back against a broken pillar, breathing deeply.

They were evolving faster than ever now.  
Perhaps... maybe they could really stand against the threats ahead.

Cherry curled up beside him, purring weakly.

But then—

**Cherry whimpered.**

Kael sat up instantly.  
Cherry’s body was trembling violently, her claws digging into the earth.

**[IRIS ALERT: ANOMALY DETECTED - MUTATION LEVEL CRITICAL]**

Kael’s heart skipped a beat as he opened the scan window.

**Cherry Mutation Spike: 13.5 ➔ 28.7**  
**Condition: Evolution Phase Initiated**  
**Vital Signs: Critical but Stabilizing**

"Cherry!" Kael called out urgently, reaching toward her.

But there was nothing he could do.

Cherry’s skin began to crack — faint, hairline fractures running along her scaled patches, glowing faintly with golden-red light. Her breathing was rapid, desperate, almost painful.

Small flakes of hardened scale flaked off, and her body twitched in agony.

She was evolving.  
Forced into the next stage of her mutation by the immense energy of the Metalfur Panther’s flesh.

Kael could only watch helplessly, clenching his fists.

**"Hold on, Cherry... hold on."**

The ruins around them were silent again, as if the entire world was holding its breath, waiting for what would emerge from the cocoon of pain.

**Chapter 21: The Bloom of a New Cherry**

Cherry’s body twisted in agony on the cold, broken earth.

Kael knelt by her side, his heart pounding helplessly against his ribs.  
He wanted to help, to ease her suffering, but he knew — this was a trial only Cherry could endure.  
The energy surging within her was too powerful, too wild.  
To interfere would only make it worse.

**Crack—**

Another sharp fissure tore across her body.

Her small form writhed and stretched unnaturally, **growing larger** with every pulse of glowing energy.  
Muscle and bone expanded, reshaping under the unbearable strain.  
Her soft frame ballooned into a majestic size, **reaching nearly that of a full-grown tiger**.

Kael could barely believe his eyes.

Her once-compact claws grew longer, sharper, becoming **pristine white like polished ivory**, gleaming even under the pale broken light of the sky.

Her body was now covered **entirely in overlapping scales**, each one tough, dense, and radiating a faint golden shimmer.  
They locked over her flesh like the plates of an ancient knight's armor.

Yet even now, Kael sensed —  
*This wasn’t the end.*

Cherry’s breathing quickened, and suddenly—

**BOOM!**

All at once, the **scales exploded outward** like shattered glass, scattering in all directions with a sound like breaking crystal.

Kael shielded his face from the fragments, peering through the glittering rain of scale-dust.

And then, from within the cocoon of smoke and light — she emerged.

**The New Cherry**

Gone were the harsh, reptilian plates.

Instead, **Cherry’s body was reborn, adorned in a magnificent coat of fur**,  
colors blazing like the sunrise:

* **Bright, fiery reds**
* **Warm, glowing oranges**
* **Soft, gentle pinks**

The colors blended seamlessly into one another, giving her an appearance so breathtaking that for a moment, Kael forgot how to breathe.

Her fur was **thick, lustrous, and almost shimmered with life itself**.

Her **whiskers had grown longer and finer**, like delicate, flowing strands of silk.

Her **ears** were now **sharply pointed**, enhancing her already keen senses.

Her **face had transformed** into something even more majestic — a beautiful mix of wild power and elegant grace.  
She no longer looked merely like an animal.  
There was an intelligence — a brilliance — burning within those golden eyes.

**All her previous injuries had vanished**, replaced by flawless, powerful flesh.

She stood there, towering and regal, as if the ruin around her was her rightful domain.

Kael stared in awe.

"...Cherry?" he whispered.

Cherry turned her head slowly toward him, her golden eyes deep and wise.  
For a moment, Kael could almost hear something inside his mind — a faint, warm echo — as if Cherry’s thoughts were brushing against his own.

She lowered her massive head slightly, a low, affectionate rumble resonating in her chest.

She recognized him.  
Not just as a companion — but as *family*.

**[IRIS SCAN - CHERRY POST-EVOLUTION]**

**Name:** Cherry (Evolved Form)  
**Species:** Unknown Mutation Line  
**Danger Rating:** 4.5 Stars  
**Mutation Level:** 45.2

**Strength:** 46.7x Average Human  
**Speed:** 49.1x Average Human  
**Stamina:** 47.3x Average Human  
**Special Traits:**

* **Elemental Fur** (Resistant to physical and elemental attacks)
* **Enhanced Regeneration**
* **Psionic Link Initiation** (Under Development)
* **Predatory Instinct Amplification**

**Status:** Healthy, Evolved, Stabilized

**Kael read the report in stunned silence.**

**4.5 stars.**  
Cherry had surpassed even the most powerful monsters they had encountered till now.

She had transcended.

He slowly approached her, reaching out his hand hesitantly.  
Cherry lowered her huge, beautiful head, nuzzling him gently with a deep, soft purr that vibrated through the ground.

A laugh — part relief, part disbelief — escaped Kael’s lips.

"You really are amazing," he murmured.

Cherry let out a low, playful growl and licked his face once with her rough, warm tongue — nearly knocking him over from sheer force.

For the first time in days, Kael allowed himself a moment to simply sit back, leaning against Cherry’s massive side, feeling the powerful heartbeat thrumming beneath her beautiful fur.

The future was still uncertain.  
The dangers were still looming.  
But now — he wasn’t alone.

They weren’t just survivors anymore.  
They were becoming legends of this shattered world.

And this was just the beginning.

**Chapter 22: The Bond Beyond Words**

The cool morning breeze whistled across the broken landscape, carrying with it the scents of distant monsters and damp earth.

Kael sat silently beside Cherry, his arms resting across his knees, his mind spinning in a thousand directions.  
He looked up at her — at her **enormous, majestic form**, so unlike the small, mischievous companion she had once been.

A troubling thought gnawed at him.

*"She's... too big now..."*  
**Moving stealthily, hiding, traveling together — all of it would become impossible if Cherry remained this large.**

Before he could voice his worries aloud, Cherry — who had been lying quietly, her fiery-red fur glistening under the light — suddenly stirred.

She turned her golden gaze toward him, her ears flicking.  
Kael felt... something.

A pulse in his mind.

**Concern. Reassurance.**

And then —  
**Without a sound**, Cherry’s large body shimmered faintly.

Her size began to **shrink**, the transformation smooth and fluid, as if the very world obeyed her will.

Within moments, Cherry now stood only slightly taller than Kael’s waist — still powerful, still regal, but now *perfectly manageable*.

Her magnificent fur and noble aura remained unchanged — only her sheer mass had been reduced.

Kael stared in amazement.  
"You can... control your size?"

Cherry let out a low, amused rumble, her whiskers twitching with satisfaction.

Their eyes met — and in that instant, Kael **understood her intent without words**.

***"I can change if you need me to."***

A shiver ran down his spine.  
**It was real.**  
They were connected now — mentally, emotionally — something deeper than mere companionship.

A true bond.

**The New Power**

Still stunned, Kael asked hesitantly, "Cherry... do you have any new abilities now?"

Cherry tilted her head slightly, her sharp ears flicking once.  
Then, almost proudly, she raised her right paw.

Her claws extended — long, gleaming, deadly.

But now, something was different.

**A faint blue aura** shimmered around her claws, rippling like water touched by moonlight.

Kael leaned closer, his breath caught in his throat.

Cherry swung her paw swiftly in the air —

**Swooosh!**

A **small arc of blue light** shot forward, slicing cleanly through the air, striking a nearby half-dead tree.

At first, Kael thought it had done nothing.

But as he approached cautiously, he noticed fine, **precise cuts etched into the bark**, faint but real.

The tree shuddered and cracked slightly, a clear sign of **potential** — even if the ability was still immature.

**[IRIS SCAN - CHERRY (EVOLVED) - ABILITIES UPDATED]**

**Name:** Cherry (Evolved Form)  
**Species:** Unknown Mutation Line  
**Danger Rating:** 4.7 Stars  
**Mutation Level:** 46.1

**Primary Traits:**

* **Dynamic Size Shift**  
  (Ability to alter physical mass within reasonable limits to suit mobility and combat needs.)
* **Elemental Fur Defense**  
  (Fur resists most physical attacks, energy-based attacks mildly reduced.)
* **Enhanced Physical Attributes**  
  (Massive increases to strength, speed, stamina, flexibility.)

**Special Abilities:**

* **Claw Arc (Lv. 1)**  
  (Allows Cherry to project an arc of compressed energy from her claws. Currently capable of creating shallow cuts on surfaces. Range: 8-10 meters. Damage: Minor but scalable with evolution.)
* **Psionic Bond - Stage 1**  
  (A permanent, low-level mental connection established with Kael. Enables:  
  + Emotional transmission.
  + Simple thought sharing.
  + Early danger detection.)

**Evolution Potential Detected:** HIGH  
(Claw Arc and Psionic Bond abilities expected to evolve significantly.)

Kael exhaled a long breath, rereading the scan twice.

**Dynamic Size Control.**  
**Claw Energy Projection.**  
**A true Psionic Bond.**

He knelt down in front of Cherry, meeting her intelligent gaze.

"You're amazing," he said softly, feeling the warmth of her pride and affection flow back into his mind like a gentle tide.

Cherry pressed her forehead against his chest lightly, purring in response.

Kael couldn't help but smile.

He wasn’t alone anymore — not just in battle, but even in spirit.  
They could sense each other’s fears, hopes, thoughts, and dreams.  
Their bond was something greater than he could have ever imagined.

Together, they would face the dangers of this broken world — and whatever else waited beyond the horizon.

**Chapter 23: Reunion Amidst Ruins**

The broken landscape stretched endlessly before them, a wasteland of shattered buildings and half-melted roads.  
Kael walked carefully, spear in hand, Cherry padding silently beside him in her reduced but powerful form.

The bond between them pulsed faintly — a quiet awareness, a steady reassurance in the middle of this unforgiving land.

Suddenly, **Iris emitted a soft warning tone.**

**Movement detected. Ten humans. Conflict ongoing.**

Kael's body tensed.  
"Humans?" he muttered under his breath.  
In this world, humans were as dangerous as monsters — maybe even more so.

Cherry crouched low beside him, her body ready for anything.

They moved quietly toward the source of the signal.

As Kael peeked from behind a shattered wall, he froze.

A group of about ten people were gathered in a loose circle, weapons drawn, surrounded by a pack of low-level mutated wolves — snarling, snapping, creeping closer.

Among the desperate figures, **several faces hit him like a bolt of lightning.**

**David. Victor. Emily. Maya. Ethan.**

For a moment, Kael couldn’t breathe.

It was them — battered, scarred, tougher, but unmistakably *them*.  
Tears burned the corners of his eyes.

They were **alive.**

Without hesitation, Kael stepped out from cover, Cherry following with a low, rumbling growl that sent shockwaves through the monsters.

The mutated wolves immediately stopped, their ears flattening, their tails tucking between their legs.

The humans turned — weapons raised instinctively — until their eyes widened in disbelief.

"**KAEL!!**"  
"**CHERRY!!**"

David was the first to shout, his voice cracking with raw emotion.

Before the others could react, Kael and Cherry rushed forward, weapons flashing, and in a swift, ruthless dance of death, the wolves were slain.

Blood soaked into the cracked concrete, and silence fell.

**The Reunion**

David was the first to reach him, throwing his arms around Kael in a desperate hug.

"You’re alive...! We thought you were dead!" David gasped.

Victor came next, clasping Kael’s shoulder with a strength that belied his old age. His weathered face showed a rare, wide smile.

Emily, the young girl who had once cried at every scare, now clung to Kael's arm, sobbing quietly.

Maya’s fierce, relieved gaze met his. She said nothing, simply placing a hand over her heart in a silent vow of solidarity.

Even Ethan — always the quiet one — grinned crookedly, giving Kael a light punch on the shoulder.

Kael's heart felt full for the first time in what felt like forever.

**The New Faces**

As the group relaxed, Kael finally noticed the five new faces.

* **Three young women**, their bodies lean and marked with the signs of many battles, their eyes sharp and intelligent.
* **Two older men**, built like warriors, rough and hardened.

[**Scan Readings**]

* **Girls**: Star level approx **1.2** each.
* **Older Men**: Star level approx **2.3**, close to Kael's current level.

The older men kept their weapons lowered, but their bodies remained tense, eyes darting often toward Cherry.

They whispered among themselves, subtle movements of distrust, instinctively sensing Cherry's **overwhelming, wild aura** — an aura not even two-star monsters could match.

Kael understood.  
**Cherry was too powerful now.**

Even in her smaller form, her presence was a pressure, like standing too close to a storm about to break.

The group couldn’t tell exactly what she was — but they *knew* she was dangerous.

**Smoothing Over Fears**

David quickly stepped forward, raising a hand to calm the new members.

"It’s alright! That's Cherry. She’s Kael’s partner. She’s saved our lives more times than I can count!"

Victor added in his deep, steady voice, "If it wasn’t for Kael and Cherry, none of us would have made it this far."

The older men exchanged glances, their muscles easing slightly, but a wariness remained in their eyes.

Kael smiled disarmingly and decided to tell them the truth — *well, half the truth.*

"I got separated after the tree monster attacked. A big rock fell — pure luck," he said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.  
"Cherry kept me alive after that."

Technically not a lie.  
But not the full truth either.

He wasn't ready to tell them about the voice, the Protectors, the incoming war from the stars.  
**Not yet.**

Not until he understood it himself.

Cherry purred lightly, brushing her fiery body against Kael’s leg, giving him her silent support.

The older men still gave her cautious looks — but now it was with **respect** instead of **hostility**.

**Rejoining the Family**

As the sun dipped low behind the ruined skyline, the group settled around a small, sheltered area.  
They shared rations, stories of battles, losses, victories.

Kael learned that **Samuel** — the strong, dependable older man — had been separated during a monster ambush.

No one knew if he was alive or dead.

The mood darkened at the thought, but there was still hope.

Kael promised himself he would help find him — if Samuel was still out there, they would reunite again.

Meanwhile, Kael noticed how much everyone had grown:

* **Maya and Victor**: Now nearing **2 stars**, their movements sharper, their instincts honed.
* **David and Emily**: **1 star** each — stronger, but still vulnerable.
* **Ethan**: **1.1 star**, quiet but reliable, like a blade quietly being sharpened.

Their scars spoke of suffering — but their eyes spoke of survival.

They had all been tempered by fire, and yet they still held onto hope.

As night fell, Kael leaned against a cracked wall, gazing at the sky.  
Cherry rested beside him, her warm body a comforting presence.

He had found them again.  
Against all odds, they were together.

But deep inside, Kael knew —  
**This was only the beginning.**

The real storm was yet to come.

**Chapter 24: The Road West**

Morning broke over the shattered world in hues of muted gray and dull gold.

For the first time in a long while, Kael had slept deeply — without the constant itch of danger scratching at the back of his mind.  
Cherry curled around him like a warm, protective shield, her vibrant fur gleaming even in the dim light.

The group slowly began to stir, yawns and groans filling the air as stiff bodies stretched and checked weapons out of sheer habit.

Kael stood and walked over to where David was packing supplies into a salvaged bag.

"Hey, David," Kael said, clapping him lightly on the back.  
"Who exactly are those five new faces? The three girls and the two older guys?"

David smiled faintly, adjusting the strap of his bag.  
"You noticed, huh? They're… special."

He looked over his shoulder to where the others were gathered.

**The Story of the Newcomers**

David began explaining as they worked:

"They're from a military family.  
Rich, well-connected... but also tough as nails.  
The three girls — they're triplets: **Aria, Lena, and Lyra**."

"Their father, **Commander Darius Voss**, was a legend in the Eastern Warfront.  
Frontline battles, black-ops missions, you name it — he survived them all.  
But a few years ago, he was badly injured. Lost a leg. Now he’s stationed at the military base west of here — runs operations from behind the lines."

David paused, sighing.

"The two older guys? They’re his old comrades:  
**Garrett** and **Marcus** — loyal to a fault.  
They swore to protect the triplets and get them back safely to their father."

Kael nodded thoughtfully.

The names etched themselves into his mind:

* **Aria Voss** — Calm, calculating, the leader among the triplets.
* **Lena Voss** — Fiery, quick to anger, but fiercely protective.
* **Lyra Voss** — Quiet, observant, the sharpest eyes among them.
* **Garrett** — Broad-shouldered, thick-bearded, spoke rarely but always with weight.
* **Marcus** — Slimmer, faster, with eyes that missed nothing.

"Good people," David concluded, "but they’ve seen hell. Just like us."

Kael glanced at the group again — at the way they moved, constantly alert even while eating or resting.

**Survivors. Warriors.**

They’d need every blade and bullet to reach the military base.

**The Discovery**

As they prepared to move out, Emily — ever-curious — darted into a nearby collapsed building, shouting back excitedly:

"GUYS! I FOUND SOMETHING!"

Everyone rushed over, weapons drawn — just in case.

Inside the building, half-buried under dust and rubble, were two incredible finds:

* A battered but sleek **air-jeep** — looking like a cross between a military humvee and a hovercraft.
* A futuristic **air-bike**, compact and designed for speed.

Kael’s eyes lit up.  
These machines could easily do **500 MHP** in prime condition — enough to outrun most mutated monsters.

But a quick scan showed the sad truth:

**[Iris Report**]

* **Air-Jeep**: 42% structural damage. Battery depleted. Engines partially functional.
* **Air-Bike**: 33% structural damage. Energy cells unstable but repairable.

David sighed. "Figures. Nothing ever works."

But Kael stepped forward, a small grin forming.

"Leave it to me."

**The Repair**

Kael knelt by the air-jeep, pulling out a small toolkit from his bag.  
Cherry sat nearby, tail flicking, watching curiously.

He activated **Iris** for additional support.

**Iris Interface:**

"Analyzing blueprints.  
Displaying repair protocols.  
Commencing assisted manual override."

Sweat beaded on Kael’s forehead as he worked — cutting damaged wiring, fusing new conduits, rigging makeshift power lines from backup energy cells found in a broken vending unit nearby.

For hours, he and Iris toiled together, while Cherry occasionally helped by bringing lightweight parts to him with her jaws — careful not to crush them.

The others watched in amazement.  
Even Garrett and Marcus had to grudgingly admit Kael knew what he was doing.

Finally, after hours of work...

**HUMMMMMM.**

The air-jeep floated a few inches off the ground, vibrating steadily.

Kael whooped and pumped his fist.

The air-bike took a little longer, but after stabilizing its cracked energy cell with a fusion weld, it too buzzed to life, sleek and eager.

[**Status**: Operational — 65% Efficiency]

* **Sufficient for short to medium-range travel.**
* **Maximum distance before recharge needed: Approx. 150 miles.**

Not perfect — but it would be enough.

**Heading West**

By noon, the group was on the move.

Garrett and Marcus drove the air-jeep, packed with supplies and Emily, David, Maya, and Lyra.

Aria, Lena, Ethan, and Victor rode the air-bike in pairs, weapons at the ready.

Kael, preferring flexibility, chose to move on foot alongside Cherry.

Cherry, even in her reduced form, was faster and stronger than almost any transport — her muscles rippling with contained power.

The plan was simple:

* Head west.
* Reach the **military base** where Darius Voss commanded.
* Regroup. Resupply.
* And finally — rest in safety.

At least for a while.

As they sped along cracked highways and through ghostly abandoned towns, Kael found himself smiling for the first time in ages.

They were together.  
They had transport.  
They had hope.

But far in the distance — far beyond the western horizon — dark clouds began to gather.

And with them, *something monstrous was coming*.

**Kael’s instincts whispered:**

*This was only the beginning.*

**Kael’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 20
* **Height**: 6'1" (185 cm)
* **Weight**: 180 lbs (82 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, lean
* **Mutation Level**: 2.7 Star (~27x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Muscular development from constant combat and training.
  + Increased agility and endurance.
  + Enhanced reflexes, now capable of reacting faster than most mutants or creatures.
  + Eyes are sharper, and his vision is now enhanced to detect minute details.
* **Strength**: 2.7 Star
* **Speed**: 2.5 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.8 Star
* **Endurance**: 3.1 Star
* **Mutation Traits**:  
  + Kael's body has shown considerable changes — thicker skin that is more resilient to damage, enhanced muscle growth, and increased reaction times.
  + Sharp senses and heightened survival instincts.

**Cherry’s Physical Report:**

* **Species**: Mutated Cat (Evolutionary form)
* **Height**: 5'0" (152 cm) — as of her current smaller form.
* **Weight**: 120 lbs (54 kg)
* **Build**: Sleek, muscular
* **Mutation Level**: 4.5 Star (~45x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + **Size**: After evolution, Cherry’s body grew to the size of a tiger, but she later reduced her size consciously.
  + **Claws**: Long, razor-sharp, pristine white, now glowing with a faint blue aura.
  + **Fur**: Bright red, orange, and pink — soft, yet resistant to damage, making it appear more like scales.
  + **Teeth**: Pristine white, elongated, able to tear through most materials.
  + **Whiskers**: Long, sensitive, capable of detecting changes in the air and vibrations.
  + **Scales**: Areas around her body are now covered with thin, shimmering scales that are as hard as metal.
* **Abilities**:  
  + **Claws of Light**: Cherry can now unleash glowing arcs of light when swiping with her claws.
  + **Mental Connection**: A newly developed ability, allowing her to communicate with Kael through thoughts, despite not being able to speak.

**David’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 20
* **Height**: 5'10" (178 cm)
* **Weight**: 160 lbs (73 kg)
* **Build**: Lean, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.0 Star (~10x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Heightened stamina and reflexes.
  + Muscular development with noticeable improvement in strength.
  + Sharper vision and hearing, making him more aware of his surroundings.
* **Strength**: 1.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.3 Star

**Victor’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 62
* **Height**: 6'0" (183 cm)
* **Weight**: 190 lbs (86 kg)
* **Build**: Stocky, solid
* **Mutation Level**: 2.0 Star (~20x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Despite his age, Victor’s body has become stronger and more resilient.
  + Increased endurance and healing speed due to mutation.
  + Slightly more muscular build compared to before, though still more on the stocky side.
* **Strength**: 2.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.8 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.3 Star

**Emily’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 12
* **Height**: 4'10" (147 cm)
* **Weight**: 80 lbs (36 kg)
* **Build**: Slender, small
* **Mutation Level**: 1.0 Star (~10x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Muscular development is slow but steady.
  + Enhanced reflexes and agility, though still in the early stages of her mutation.
  + Improved vision and hearing, allowing her to sense danger before it occurs.
* **Strength**: 1.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.3 Star

**Maya’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 34
* **Height**: 5'7" (170 cm)
* **Weight**: 140 lbs (64 kg)
* **Build**: Lean, agile
* **Mutation Level**: 2.0 Star (~20x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Maya’s mutation has enhanced her combat skills, giving her greater strength and speed.
  + Increased muscle definition, but with an emphasis on flexibility.
  + Reflexes have been sharpened, improving her ability to avoid attacks and land precise strikes.
* **Strength**: 2.0 Star
* **Speed**: 2.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.3 Star

**Ethan’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 25
* **Height**: 6'2" (188 cm)
* **Weight**: 170 lbs (77 kg)
* **Build**: Athletic, lean
* **Mutation Level**: 1.1 Star (~11x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Increased physical prowess in combat situations.
  + Enhanced agility and stamina, though his mutation rate is still relatively low.
  + Slight muscle definition increase, but not as much as others.
* **Strength**: 1.1 Star
* **Speed**: 1.4 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.3 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.5 Star

**Aria Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'6" (167 cm)
* **Weight**: 135 lbs (61 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, toned
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Increased endurance and agility.
  + Her mutation has enhanced her physical capabilities, including strength and reflexes.
  + A lean but muscular frame suited for agility-based combat.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.3 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.6 Star

**Lena Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'5" (165 cm)
* **Weight**: 130 lbs (59 kg)
* **Build**: Slim, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Increased reflexes and speed.
  + More agile, with improved stamina and combat capabilities.
  + Lean muscle development, focused on speed over raw strength.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.4 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.5 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.6 Star

**Lyra Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'7" (170 cm)
* **Weight**: 140 lbs (64 kg)
* **Build**: Toned, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Improved muscular tone with an emphasis on endurance and agility.
  + Quick reflexes and heightened awareness of her surroundings.
  + Slight increase in strength due to mutation.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.3 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.5 Star

**Garrett’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 38
* **Height**: 6'3" (191 cm)
* **Weight**: 210 lbs (95 kg)
* **Build**: Broad-shouldered, heavyset
* **Mutation Level**: 2.3 Star (~23x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Increased muscle mass, now more solid and durable.
  + Reflexes and stamina have improved, allowing him to fight and take hits longer.
  + Stronger combat abilities due to his mutation.
* **Strength**: 2.3 Star
* **Speed**: 2.1 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.5 Star

**Marcus’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 40
* **Height**: 6'1" (185 cm)
* **Weight**: 195 lbs (88 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, dense
* **Mutation Level**: 2.3 Star (~23x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:  
  + Increased endurance and stamina.
  + More agile than before, with a noticeable increase in strength and combat readiness.
  + Muscular development focused on resilience and power.
* **Strength**: 2.3 Star
* **Speed**: 2.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.5 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.7 Star

**Summary of the Group:**

* **Kael**: 2.7 Star
* **Cherry**: 4.5 Star
* **David**: 1.0 Star
* **Victor**: 2.0 Star
* **Emily**: 1.0 Star
* **Maya**: 2.0 Star
* **Ethan**: 1.1 Star
* **Aria**: 1.2 Star
* **Lena**: 1.2 Star
* **Lyra**: 1.2 Star
* **Garrett**: 2.3 Star
* **Marcus**: 2.3 Star

**Chapter 25: Wings of Death**

The distant outline of the military base glimmered like salvation on the horizon — just half a mile away.

Kael gripped the side of the vehicle as it rattled forward, the engine straining with every mile. Just as hope began to flicker, a sharp screech pierced the air.

Above them, the sky darkened unnaturally.

**Fifty mutated crows**, each nearly the size of a dog, swooped from the sky in synchronized chaos. Their feathers shimmered with a sickly iridescence, eyes burning with primal fury. Each of them carried the overwhelming force of a **2-Star mutant**, making them a devastating airborne threat.

"Keep going!" Kael barked, his eyes scanning the air for patterns in their swarm.

The vehicles roared forward, their speed pushing into the red. The strain of partial recovery from previous damage was starting to show. The dashboard blinked erratically. Warning signs lit up one after the other.

**BOOM—CLANK—HISSSS!**

The lead engine gave a final growl before seizing up completely.

They screeched to a stop just at the entrance of the military base.

The swarm of crows descended.

Before anyone could react, the base’s gates burst open.

From within, a battalion of **50 soldiers** emerged like a tidal wave of precision and might. Each bore the strength of a **2-Star warrior**, their movements refined by relentless training and combat.

And at their center, stood a man like a wall of steel and storm:

**Commander Darius Voss.**

Tall and powerfully built, Darius exuded leadership and raw might — a **3-Star powerhouse**, visibly more potent than even Kael. His eyes scanned the battlefield with a predator’s awareness. The air around him crackled with confidence and command.

“Engage the crows!” he roared.

The soldiers surged forward. In perfect formation, their synchronized assaults cleaved through the skyborne horde. For every crow that swooped, three fell in coordinated gunfire and blade work.

Kael watched in stunned silence — for once not having to be the frontline shield.

Darius’s massive sword sliced through the air like a lightning strike, cleaving through three crows in a single sweep. Blood and black feathers filled the air as the battle raged.

Within minutes, the massacre ended. The crows, overwhelmed, were annihilated.

As silence settled, Darius turned — his stern expression softening at the sight of the **triplets: Aria, Lena, and Lyra**.

"Dad…" Lena whispered.

Without hesitation, Darius dropped his blade and rushed forward, sweeping all three daughters into a powerful embrace. His breath caught, voice thick with emotion.

“I thought I’d lost you all…”

Tears streamed down Lyra’s cheeks as she clung to him. “We thought you were dead…”

Nearby, **Garrett and Marcus**, his old comrades, approached.

Darius’s eyes met theirs.

“Still alive, old bastards?” he grinned.

“Barely,” Garrett smirked, and the three veterans pulled each other into a fierce hug.

“You brought them here?” Darius asked, nodding toward the survivors, his gaze falling on Kael.

Garrett grinned, “Meet Kael — the reason we’re all still alive.”

Darius nodded with deep respect. “Then welcome, Kael… all of you. You’ve reached sanctuary.”

And with that, the gates of the military base closed behind them, shielding the group from the horrors of the outside world — at least for now.

**Chapter 26: Fortress of Steel and Struggle**

The steel gates of the military base sealed behind them with a resounding hiss. The survivors — dusty, battle-worn, and ragged — stood in awe.

The **Fortress Base Ardent**, as the etched plaque above the gate revealed, was more than a stronghold. It was a living organism of order and war.

**Soldiers moved in formation**, their steps synchronized like machinery. Some were running drills, executing intricate martial maneuvers with inhuman speed and precision. Others sparred with real weapons, their blows clanging like hammers on an anvil. The clash of steel against steel filled the air, mixed with the shouts of instructors.

Kael scanned the courtyard, eyes narrowing with curiosity. Every corner of the base exuded functionality — weapon forges glowed orange with fresh flames, tech labs hummed with activity, and vehicle bays stretched across the horizon with modified air-jeeps, land gliders, and heavily reinforced bikes. It was like stepping into a lost relic of pre-cataclysmic civilization.

Cherry, now walking beside Kael in her smaller form, padded along quietly, her bright fur glinting in the floodlights. Despite her sleek elegance, many soldiers instinctively stiffened at her presence. Her power was **palpable**, wild and ancient.

As they entered deeper, a group of soldiers emerged from the northern gates — bloodied, but alive. They dragged behind them **monsters’ corpses** — a hybrid between lizards and wolves. The stench was harsh, but the excitement was electric. A tech crew rushed out, analyzing the remains, extracting core tissues and bones for **tech-fusion weapons**. One of them pulled out a cannon-like weapon that buzzed with unnatural energy, aimed at a test dummy. A click — a flash — and the dummy exploded into smoke and ash.

Kael turned to Darius, impressed. “You’re not just surviving here… you’re thriving.”

Darius, his face calmer now, nodded. “The outside world may have fallen apart, but here… we rebuild. Every beast we kill teaches us something new. Their biology, their strength — we study, adapt, and create.”

“Even your weapons…” Ethan muttered, watching another soldier swing a sword whose blade shimmered with beast scales and runes.

“Yes. Monster-forged tech,” Darius explained. “We fuse mutant materials with salvaged human tech. They work… most of the time.”

Victor, standing tall despite his age, looked around in admiration. “Reminds me of the old army days — but sharper. Colder.”

“Colder is necessary now,” Maya said softly, brushing some blood off Emily’s shoulder. “We don’t have room for mistakes anymore.”

The triplets — **Aria, Lena, and Lyra** — stood together, speaking to their father in low tones. Aria looked over at Kael with curiosity, her hand resting near the hilt of her dagger.

“He’s the one, huh?” she asked Darius.

“Yes,” Darius nodded. “Without him, none of you would be here.”

Lena smiled faintly. “Then… thank you, Kael.”

Kael nodded quietly. “We all played a part. Cherry too.”

At the mention of her name, Cherry let out a gentle trill and rubbed against Kael’s leg. Her fur glimmered under the light, and several nearby soldiers whispered nervously.

Suddenly, a sharp voice echoed across the court.

“**Commander Darius.**”

Everyone turned.

A woman approached, clad in jet-black military uniform, her posture rigid and eyes sharp. She had silver streaks in her tied-back hair and a face marked with discipline and experience. A blade hung at her side, and her presence alone made several soldiers straighten their backs.

“**Vice Commander Elise Dran.**” Darius nodded. “You’re back.”

“I heard about the breach,” Elise said briskly, eyes sweeping across the group. Her gaze lingered a bit longer on Cherry. “These the survivors?”

“Yes. My daughters. Garrett and Marcus. And Kael, the one responsible for their survival.”

Elise’s expression softened just a touch. “Then they’ve earned rest.”

She turned to the group. “You’ve fought your way through hell to reach us. This base will now be your home — until you're ready to fight again. But for now… you rest. That’s an order.”

Kael opened his mouth to speak, but Elise raised a hand.

“You all smell like blood, exhaustion, and grief. You’ve seen too much. You’ve endured too much. Whatever battles you’ve fought out there — they’re done, for now. You’re safe here.”

There was a silence, as the weight of her words settled over them.

Safe.

For the first time in months, the word felt **real**.

Garrett placed a hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “I could use a bed.”

Victor chuckled. “And a real bath.”

Maya wrapped her arms around Emily. “Let’s go inside.”

Darius guided them through the main barracks. The inside was warmer, quieter — structured like a fortress but carrying touches of comfort. Clean bedding, reinforced bunk rooms, bathrooms with hot water. Small mess halls with real food. Medical bays for treatment.

Cherry curled up in a wide corner of Kael’s bunk, her eyes already closing.

Kael sat on the edge, exhaling deeply.

“Iris,” he whispered.

A faint blue light flickered near his ear. “Yes, Kael?”

“…Are we finally okay for now?”

“For now,” the voice replied. “But peace is always temporary in this world.”

Kael laid back, arms behind his head.

Across the bunkroom, the others were already drifting off — Victor snoring softly, Garrett and Marcus quietly talking, the triplets huddled close, and Emily curled beside Maya.

Kael closed his eyes. His body ached, his muscles screamed, but his mind — for the first time — rested.

Beside him, Cherry shifted slightly, her tail flicking once as her breathing steadied.

The storm outside had calmed.

And for tonight, **within these steel walls**, they were safe.

**Chapter 27: Morning Steel and Unseen Power**

The soft hum of machinery was soon drowned by **crisp shouts** and the rhythmic stomping of boots. The clang of metal, the hiss of blasters, and the low grunts of combat filled the air, resonating through the steel walls of the barracks.

Kael stirred, eyes blinking open. The ceiling above was plain, but the sounds outside drew his attention. He sat up slowly, careful not to disturb Cherry, who slept curled up at his feet. Her breathing was calm — almost synchronized with his own.

Slipping on his boots and coat, Kael quietly stepped out of the barracks.

The **training yard** beyond was alive.

Dozens of soldiers — both men and women — were lined in rows, drilling with precision. Some wielded energy-infused spears, others trained barehanded against reinforced dummies. A few sparred using high-tech weaponry made from beast bones and hybrid alloys, their blows strong enough to chip the concrete flooring.

Their movements were **clean, controlled, and deadly**.

Kael stood still for a moment, watching silently.

“Impressive, aren’t they?” came a voice behind him.

He turned — it was **Vice Commander Elise Dran**.

She looked fresh despite the early hour. Wearing sleek black training gear and her silver-streaked hair pulled tightly back, she carried the same sharp presence from the day before.

Kael nodded. “They move with purpose.”

Elise folded her arms. “They have to. The world doesn’t give us second chances anymore. These soldiers — they train daily like it's war. Because it is.”

Her eyes swept across the courtyard before settling back on Kael. “How was your rest?”

Kael exhaled, offering a slight smile. “Unfamiliar. But peaceful. For the first time in a long time.”

“That’s the base's gift,” Elise replied. “Temporary peace.”

There was a brief silence. Then, she added curiously, “That creature… Cherry, was it?”

Kael’s eyes sharpened slightly but remained calm. “Yes. She’s… special.”

“Her aura is unlike anything we’ve encountered. Not beast. Not human. Something older.”

“She’s strong,” Kael admitted. “Stronger than me. Based on my readings… nearly 4.5 stars.”

Elise’s composure cracked slightly. “What?”

Kael nodded. “She was mutated… not naturally. A corrupted tree nearly took her. But she resisted, adapted. Now she’s… something else. Loyal. A guardian.”

Elise took a step back, her eyes narrowing as she processed the weight of his words. “And she listens to you?”

“We’re… connected mentally,” he said slowly. “I can’t explain it entirely. But we understand each other.”

“I see…” she murmured, gaze drifting. “That might be dangerous. Or invaluable.”

Just then, the barracks doors opened behind them as others began to emerge.

**David**, rubbing sleep from his eyes.  
**Maya**, arm over **Emily’s** shoulder.  
**Victor**, looking better than he had in weeks.  
**Ethan**, quiet and alert as always.  
And the **triplets**, walking with graceful ease, eyes already scanning the morning activity.

“Morning,” Kael greeted with a nod.

Maya looked around. “Feels like waking into another world.”

“Didn’t expect to hear yelling and gunshots as a morning bell,” David muttered.

Kael gestured to Elise. “Vice Commander Dran. She oversees much of the base’s combat and ops. These are—”

“We’ve met,” Elise said calmly, nodding toward the group.

The triplets approached Kael. **Aria**, the most outspoken of the three, raised an eyebrow. “Watching the drills?”

Kael nodded. “More like studying.”

“I heard you thanked our father,” **Lena** said. “We should be the ones thanking *you*, though.”

“No need,” Kael replied. “He’s the reason we made it here. I just… guided the pieces.”

As they spoke, Kael subtly tapped the side of his visor. *Iris*, he whispered mentally. *Scan the soldiers and Elise. Discreetly.*

A faint pulse from his neural implant responded.

**Initiating scan...  
Target One: Soldier Cadre – Average Rating: 1.8 to 2.1 Star. Efficient. Disciplined. Specialized training in hybrid-tech combat.  
Target Two: Vice Commander Elise Dran – Power Level: 3.5 Star. Combat Signature: Concealed. Potential abilities include advanced agility, energy manipulation, kinetic shielding. Analysis: High threat potential. Surpasses Commander.**

Kael’s brow subtly twitched.

*She’s stronger than Darius…?*

Before the thought could settle, a familiar voice rang out.

“**Well, well. Seems everyone’s awake.**”

**Commander Darius Voss** strode in — his heavy boots thudding confidently despite the metallic prosthetic leg replacing his right limb. He wore a tailored black exo-suit, one arm carrying a large training blade slung across his back.

“You all rested?”

A wave of affirmatives passed through the group.

“Good,” he said gruffly. “Because rest’s over.”

He stepped forward, eyes sharp. “You’ve survived. That’s admirable. But survival in the wild is chaos. What you need now is *discipline*. Strategy. Power tempered with control.”

He placed a hand on Kael’s shoulder. “And we’ll start with you.”

Kael met his gaze. “I figured.”

Darius grinned. “You’ve got raw talent. But strength without refinement is just noise. Let’s forge it into a weapon.”

Around them, the group watched with anticipation. Cherry had risen, her tail flicking. Even Elise seemed intrigued.

“Let’s move to the sparring arena,” Darius said, gesturing toward the side yard. “Let’s see what kind of fire forged you.”

Kael exhaled, stepping forward, the others following in silence.

As he crossed the threshold of the training ring, the air felt heavier.

Not with fear.

But with **expectation**.

The storm of the past had brought them here.

Now the fire would shape who they'd become next.

**Chapter 28: Iron Will, Blunted Edge**

The **sparring arena** was a circular platform, reinforced with a strange alloy mix that could absorb shockwaves and impact without cracking. A faint shimmer of energy pulsed around it — a protective barrier to keep spectators safe.

Kael stepped into the center, twirling his spear once in his hand. Cherry perched by the sidelines, tail flicking slowly, eyes narrowed. The rest of the team stood along the outer rim, silent, watching.

Across from him stood **Commander Darius Voss**.

The aging warrior exuded confidence—not arrogance, but a kind of quiet, earned assurance that only a soldier forged in war could possess. His prosthetic leg hissed faintly with each shift of weight, but nothing about it slowed him down.

He drew a massive sword — broader than Kael’s arm and nearly as long as a spear itself. Its edge gleamed dull silver, etched with ancient runes and nicks from countless battles.

“Begin,” Elise Dran’s voice called from the sideline.

Kael surged forward, his **agility immediately evident**. Light on his feet, he spun to the side and aimed a thrust at Darius’s shoulder — fast, precise.

But Darius had already moved.

With a single step and twist of his body, he caught Kael’s spear between the flat of his sword and his prosthetic forearm, locking it effortlessly.

“You’re fast,” Darius muttered. “But speed alone doesn’t win battles.”

He twisted, and Kael was sent sprawling to the side, forced to roll and recover mid-air. Before he could get footing, the flat of Darius’s blade slammed into the ground an inch from his feet.

Kael backflipped away, breathing sharp.

He dashed in again — zigzagging, his movements a blur. From different angles, different thrusts — knees, chest, side.

But every time he got close, it was as if an invisible wall of **pressure** pushed him back. Darius's aura wasn’t just power — it was **violence given form**. A suffocating **bloodlust**, barely restrained.

Kael lunged again — this time low and to the left.

Darius **countered without moving his feet**, sword tilting slightly to deflect, then spinning in a deceptively slow arc that forced Kael back again.

No matter what Kael tried — wide sweeps, rapid thrusts, feints — he couldn’t **get in**.

He began to sweat.

He leapt into the air, spun downward with a hard descending strike—

**CLANG!**

Darius blocked it one-handed, eyes calm.

“You wield that spear like a club,” Darius said flatly. “No discipline. No flow.”

Kael growled in frustration. “Then teach me!”

But the commander didn’t stop. He advanced — slowly — each step deliberate, each movement draining Kael of options. The bloodlust grew heavier the closer he got, like a storm pressing against Kael’s chest.

Kael backed up, heart racing. He charged one last time, putting everything into a wild but fast series of jabs. Iris tried calculating angles, timing, trajectories.

**All blocked.**

Darius didn’t even look tired. His sword moved with elegant, **minimalistic grace**, every parry just enough — never overexerted, never flashy.

And then—Kael’s spear was **knocked from his hands** with a sudden upward slash.

The point of Darius’s sword rested just an inch from Kael’s throat.

The arena fell silent.

Kael dropped to one knee, chest heaving. Sweat poured down his face.

“I… yield.”

Darius lowered his blade, looking neither proud nor mocking — only focused.

“You’ve got strength. And guts,” he said. “But you’re wasting that spear.”

Kael looked up, eyes burning with frustration.

“You rely on instinct. Reaction. That only takes you so far.”

He turned to Elise, who stood near Cherry, arms crossed.

“Elise,” he called. “You use a spear.”

“I do,” she said.

“Train him.”

Kael blinked.

Darius faced him again. “If you’re serious about survival, you’ll learn control. Form. Flow. You have potential, but potential without discipline is a corpse waiting to happen.”

Kael slowly stood, picked up his spear, and gave a small bow of respect.

“I understand.”

The old commander placed a hand on his shoulder. “Good. Because from now on — you’re not just surviving anymore. You’re *fighting to win*.”

The words settled heavily on Kael’s shoulders, but also sparked something in his chest.

Resolve.

**Chapter 29: Measured by Steel**

The air was still thick with Kael’s defeat when Commander Darius turned toward the rest of the group.

“Well then,” he said, cracking his knuckles. “Who's next?”

Silence.

The oppressive weight of Darius’s **aura** — that dreadful battlefield pressure — settled over the training ground like a fog. Heavy. Suffocating. Ancient.

**Victor** stepped forward first, not out of bravado, but out of respect.

“I’ll go,” he said with a calm nod, rolling his neck. The elder survivor, grizzled and tempered, summoned his blade. His stance was grounded — sturdy.

Darius gave a faint smile. “Good. Come at me.”

Victor struck first — fast, deliberate, shield in one hand, blade in the other. His footing was solid, his rhythm measured. He weaved in and out of Darius’s zone, trying to find an opening.

But Darius didn’t budge.

Every attack was deflected with minor shifts of his sword. Then, one precise kick — not even at full strength — sent Victor skidding backward ten feet.

“Still too direct,” Darius said. “You've got the heart, but you're lacking deception.”

Victor let out a low grunt, nodding in agreement as he caught his breath.

Then **Maya** stepped forward.

She unsheathed twin short blades, twirling them deftly.

“I won’t win,” she said softly. “But I want to see how far I’ve come.”

Darius nodded. “Show me.”

Maya dashed in like a shadow, flickering side to side, slicing through the air. Her agility was remarkable — her movement unpredictable. But Darius read every motion like a book.

One twist of his body, one strike of the pommel — and Maya hit the ground, breath knocked from her lungs.

She coughed and grinned bitterly. “That aura of yours… really is no joke.”

Darius offered her a hand. “Your technique is good — but you're hesitating. Fear still holds the edge of your blade.”

She looked up, startled, then silently nodded.

Next, **Garrett and Marcus** stepped forward side by side.

"Let's make it interesting," Garrett smirked. "The old dogs versus the older wolf."

Marcus cracked his knuckles. "We might not win. But we won't fall easily."

Darius raised an eyebrow. “You’d better not.”

What followed was a more tactical exchange. Garrett wielded a broadsword with strength and discipline, while Marcus used a mix of martial arts and light axe swings. They coordinated — one attacking while the other baited. For the first time, Darius **stepped back**.

But only barely.

Ten minutes in, sweat pouring from both of them, Darius **stopped holding back**. A single sweep of his blade pushed Marcus off balance. Another movement and Garrett’s sword was knocked skyward.

They both hit the ground, panting.

“Well fought,” Darius said sincerely.

“You’re a monster,” Marcus muttered, rolling to sit up.

The remaining members — **David**, **Emily**, **Ethan**, and the **triplets** — hadn’t even stepped forward. They were frozen in place.

It wasn’t fear of Darius, not entirely — it was the **aura**, like a phantom hand on their throat, preventing movement.

Darius walked to them slowly, the pressure easing.

“You couldn’t move,” he said. “That’s not failure. It’s instinct. But instinct must be reshaped through experience.”

He stood tall and addressed them all.

**Darius’s Assessment**

**To Victor:**  
“You’ve got natural leadership and the spirit of a shield. Join the **Guardian Division**. Learn the art of defensive warfare and battlefield control.”

**To Maya:**  
“You move like the wind, but the wind lacks resolve. Train with the **Phantom Scouts**. Learn to strike without mercy.”

**To Garrett and Marcus:**  
“You two still have edge left. Join the **Weapon Specialists Unit** — you’ll hone both tech-weapons and close-combat tactics.”

**To David and Ethan:**  
“Not ready for battle. But you’re brave. Train with the **Rookie Initiative Corps** — they’ll harden your nerves and reflexes.”

**To Emily:**  
“You have a gift — your senses are sharper than most. Train with the **Reconnaissance Unit**. Learn to survive in wild zones.”

**To the Triplets — Freya, Lira, and Nyra:**  
“You have potential, and you already work as one. You’ll join the **Synchronization Team**. It’s an elite squad that focuses on synergy combat. Your bond is your weapon.”

Finally, he turned to Kael and Cherry.

**To Kael:**  
“You have raw strength and courage. But you need discipline. Train under **Elise Dran**. Master your spear. Earn your weapon.”

**To Cherry:**  
“You are… something new. I don’t know what you truly are, but you are powerful. Stay close to Kael — protect him, and learn from us.”

Darius looked over them all, his voice calm but commanding.

“You have a week. Then I want to see all of you train harder than ever before. This world doesn’t wait for the weak — it devours them.”

He turned and walked off, the crowd silent.

Kael looked at his companions — some exhausted, some inspired, all quiet.

The training had begun — not just of body, but of soul.

**Chapter 30: Forged in the Fire of Training**

Two weeks had passed since Kael and his group had entered the military base, and now, their journey of growth began. The training was grueling, designed to sharpen their weaknesses and enhance their strengths. In particular, two members of the team stood out for their intense development: **Victor** and **Maya**.

**Victor’s Training in the Guardian Division**

Victor had always been the backbone of the group. His leadership and tactical thinking had helped them survive countless encounters. But his body, while strong, lacked the precision and endurance needed to withstand the toughest of battles. To improve his defensive capabilities, he was assigned to the **Guardian Division**, a group of soldiers who specialized in tanking damage and protecting others.

**Trainer: Sergeant Rayne** — A veteran of the frontlines, with a gruff demeanor and a tough, battle-worn body. Standing at 2.6 stars, Sergeant Rayne’s presence was like a boulder — immovable, constant.

The training began with stamina-building exercises. Victor was thrown into relentless drills that tested his ability to absorb damage and continue fighting. He wore heavy armor and shielded against blows from various types of melee and ranged attacks. The goal wasn’t just to survive the onslaught but to understand how to conserve energy and position himself as an impenetrable wall for his team.

Victor quickly learned that standing still wasn’t the answer. He had to move with the blows, rolling and shifting with precision to keep the enemy at bay without exhausting himself.

After two weeks of rigorous training, his physical tolerance had improved dramatically. His endurance had nearly doubled, and his ability to take hits without buckling was beyond what he had ever expected.

His strength had also increased, though his growth was less about speed and more about resilience.

**Victor’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.3 stars (down from 2 stars)
* **Speed:** 1.9 stars (same)
* **Endurance/Defense:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Tactical Thinking:** 2.4 stars (no change)

**Training Highlights:**

* **Shield Mastery:** Through grueling training sessions with heavy shields, Victor had learned the true art of defense. He was no longer just a shield-wielder; he could block and parry with finesse, making it harder for any enemy to break his guard.
* **Endurance Drills:** Holding positions for extended periods under duress became second nature. Victor was now able to resist both physical exhaustion and mental strain for longer periods than ever before.
* **Counter-attack Techniques:** Rayne had drilled into him that defense was not just about blocking; it was about creating opportunities for retaliation. Victor’s counter-strikes, though slower than Maya’s, were devastatingly powerful.

By the end of the two weeks, Victor’s strength lay in his ability to withstand endless punishment and protect others. His new training in endurance and defense had given him a sturdier physique and a more powerful stance in battle.

**Maya’s Training in the Phantom Scouts**

Unlike Victor, **Maya** was known for her speed and agility, her light steps barely making a sound as she moved. However, her previous training had been lacking in precision. Though she could dart in and out of combat effortlessly, she struggled to deal decisive blows to enemies who were just as fast or stronger.

Assigned to the **Phantom Scouts**, Maya underwent an intense program designed to increase her speed and her ability to hit her opponents with surgical precision.

**Trainer: Sergeant Aiko** — A nimble, quick fighter standing at 2.6 stars. Aiko specialized in stealth tactics, close combat, and swift attacks. Her agility was almost otherworldly, and she was renowned for moving faster than the human eye could follow.

Aiko’s training methods were unconventional. Maya spent hours working on **movement drills**, learning to move even faster while maintaining control over her body. Aiko would blindfold her and throw objects at her, forcing her to dodge and react based solely on her reflexes. They also practiced quick strikes — fast enough to incapacitate an enemy before they had a chance to respond.

Maya’s speed increased exponentially, and so did her ability to land precise, devastating strikes. She was becoming a blur of motion in combat, something her enemies would only realize too late.

Her strength did not lie in taking hits; it was in **avoiding them** and overwhelming her enemies with rapid, unrelenting attacks.

**Maya’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.3 stars (down from 2 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.6 stars (up from 2.4 stars)
* **Endurance:** 2.0 stars (same)
* **Stealth/Precision:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.2 stars)

**Training Highlights:**

* **Quick Reflexes:** Maya’s speed had improved to a level where she could avoid most attacks. Her ability to evade high-speed strikes had become nearly instinctive.
* **Silent Movement:** Aiko had taught Maya to move without making a sound, blending into shadows and becoming nearly invisible. This new skill allowed her to outmaneuver opponents and strike without them even realizing it.
* **Critical Strikes:** Her precision in close-combat had become razor-sharp. Every strike was aimed at weak points in the enemy’s defense, creating openings for a kill.

**Physical Training Summary and Comparison**

By the end of the two-week training period, **Victor** had grown significantly in his physical tolerance and defense, becoming a shield for his team. His **endurance** was his greatest strength, but his **speed** had not significantly improved. He was a tank on the battlefield, a wall that would not fall easily.

Meanwhile, **Maya** had honed her speed and agility to a level where her strikes could reach lethal force before the enemy had a chance to react. Her **stealth and precision** had improved drastically, though her **endurance** remained average for her class.

While Victor would be the one to take the hits and defend the team, Maya would be the one to weave through the enemy lines and incapacitate them with surgical strikes.

Their strengths now lay in different areas, yet both were formidable in their own right.

**Chapter 31: Refining Skills and Learning New Tech**

The atmosphere in the military base had grown tense but focused as the **Weapon Specialists Unit** and the **Rookie Initiative Corps** began their training. For **Garrett**, **Marcus**, **David**, and **Ethan**, the next two weeks would be crucial in enhancing their combat abilities with the modern technologies available to them. The trainers assigned to them were veterans in their own right, but also specialists in the cutting-edge weaponry now used in the battlefield.

**Garrett and Marcus - Weapon Specialists Unit**

The **Weapon Specialists Unit** was a group of soldiers who had specialized in the use of advanced weaponry, combining traditional combat experience with futuristic technology. For **Garrett** and **Marcus**, their training focused on polishing their already formidable skills and adapting to the new tech designed to enhance their combat abilities.

**Trainer: Lieutenant Tessa and Sergeant Brian** — Both were 2.5-star soldiers, and more importantly, they were veterans whom Garrett and Marcus had trained alongside during previous campaigns. They had once been under Garrett’s and Marcus’s command on the battlefield, but now it was their turn to pass on the knowledge. Their task was to reintroduce the two veterans to modern weaponry.

**Training Focus:**

* **Garrett** worked with the **Energy Axe**. This advanced weapon used a combination of high-tech materials and energy circuits, making the axe able to slice through the toughest enemies with precision and power. While Garrett was already skilled with an axe, the inclusion of energy forces required him to learn how to control its discharge and swing timing to avoid overloading the weapon or misfiring its energy pulse.
* **Marcus** was assigned a **Rocket Hammer**. A powerful weapon with rocket force and energy-infused hits, designed to break down even the toughest defensive structures. The challenge for Marcus was learning how to manage the force without losing control. The hammer required precise timing to activate the rocket boost without overextending the swing or leaving himself vulnerable.

**Training Outcome:**

* **Garrett**: His experience with traditional axes meant that mastering the energy feature was more about finesse than raw strength. Through two weeks of intense training, Garrett had regained his edge in combat. The energy pulse required constant adaptation, but he learned to use it with incredible efficiency.
* **Marcus**: The Rocket Hammer required a lot of practice in terms of timing and stamina. While Marcus was already physically strong, the new technology forced him to improve his coordination with his heavy strikes.

By the end of the two-week period, both Garrett and Marcus had regained their former skills, enhanced by their ability to use modern weaponry.

**Garrett’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.4 stars (no significant change)
* **Endurance:** 2.5 stars (no significant change)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Energy Axe):** 2.6 stars (up from 2.4 stars)
* **Combat Tactics:** 2.6 stars (no significant change)

**Marcus’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.3 stars (no significant change)
* **Endurance:** 2.4 stars (no significant change)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Rocket Hammer):** 2.6 stars (up from 2.5 stars)
* **Combat Tactics:** 2.6 stars (no significant change)

**David and Ethan - Rookie Initiative Corps**

The **Rookie Initiative Corps** was a training division designed to bring new recruits up to speed quickly, especially those who had little experience or were in need of serious improvement. **David** and **Ethan**, with their relatively low starting strength, would face intense training in modern combat techniques.

**Trainer: Corporal Nara and Sergeant Jaxon** — Both stood at 2.5 stars, but they were skilled in working with rookies, pushing their limits and training them to fight with cutting-edge weapons. Their goal was to take David and Ethan from being amateurs to competent soldiers.

**Training Focus:**

* **David** and **Ethan** were taught to use **Modern Guns**. These weapons were fitted with advanced sights, recoil dampeners, and energy boosters. Their training began with basic shooting drills, progressing to tactical shooting with moving targets and in combat scenarios. The challenge for both was to develop their reflexes and control over these modern firearms.
* In addition to the guns, both were trained to wield **mutated bone-made shields and swords**. These weapons were crafted from the bones of mutated creatures, hardened and enhanced to withstand intense combat. Their design provided both durability and lethality, but the challenge for David and Ethan was learning how to utilize their unique properties in battle.

**Training Outcome:**

* **David**: His development was largely based on improving his speed and reflexes. As someone who had little experience with combat, his progress in handling the guns was impressive. His shooting accuracy improved significantly, and his ability to move and shoot at the same time became more fluid.
* **Ethan**: Similar to David, Ethan focused on improving his basic reflexes and learning how to use the mutated bone weaponry. His strikes with the bone sword became more precise, and his shield maneuvers were faster and more calculated.

At the end of the two weeks, David and Ethan were much improved. They were no longer beginners, but soldiers with a basic grasp of modern weapons. They would require more experience in the field, but their newfound confidence and skills had put them on the path to being powerful fighters.

**David’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 1.7 stars (up from 1 star)
* **Speed:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Endurance:** 1.6 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Modern Guns):** 1.9 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Reflexes:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.2 stars)

**Ethan’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 1.7 stars (up from 1.1 stars)
* **Speed:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Endurance:** 1.7 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Mutated Bone Sword/Shield):** 1.9 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Reflexes:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.3 stars)

**Training Summary:**

* **Garrett and Marcus**: Both veterans improved their proficiency with modern weapons, regaining their edge in combat. They are now better equipped to handle both traditional and modern threats, with their **weapon proficiency** reaching new heights.
* **David and Ethan**: Although they were once rookies, their training in modern firearms and mutated bone weaponry has significantly boosted their **reflexes** and **weapon proficiency**. They are no longer at the mercy of their inexperience and are ready for more serious challenges.

With these two groups now well-trained, the journey ahead would prove far more dangerous, but also filled with opportunity for growth and survival.

**Chapter 32: The Training of Emily and the Triplets**

The base was bustling with activity as the group of ten warriors began to settle into their new roles. While **Garrett**, **Marcus**, **David**, and **Ethan** were working hard with their respective teams, there were still those whose growth was being nurtured in different ways. Two distinct groups were focused on this period of training: **Emily**, the youngest of the survivors, and **the Triplets**, whose coordination in battle would be crucial for their survival in the dangerous world they lived in.

**Emily’s Training - Reconnaissance Unit**

At only **12 years old**, **Emily** was much younger than the others, yet her keen instincts and sharp senses were nothing short of extraordinary. The **Reconnaissance Unit**, tasked with scouting and surviving in the harshest environments, was the perfect fit for her. Led by **Captain Rhea**, a 2.4-star veteran of the wild zones, the training was grueling, especially for someone as young as Emily. But Emily was determined, showing resilience that few of her age could ever hope to match.

**Training Focus:**

Emily's training was aimed at improving her **survival skills** in the wild zones, where mutated creatures roamed freely and the environment itself was hazardous. The Reconnaissance Unit was known for its ability to navigate through these zones and gather intelligence, making them one of the most valuable units in the military base.

* **Tracking and Stealth**: Emily learned how to move silently, even through the densest of forests, and track creatures without alerting them. She also perfected the art of camouflage, blending into her surroundings to avoid detection.
* **Survival and Sensing**: Emily’s natural ability to sense danger was an asset, and Captain Rhea focused on enhancing her already-sharp instincts. Through special exercises, Emily learned to identify different organisms, track them, and even sense danger from nearly 500 meters away.
* **Combat and Agility**: Although Emily was not yet as strong as the other soldiers, her **agility** and **reflexes** made her a formidable opponent when it came to quick, small-scale skirmishes. She practiced using small weapons—such as throwing knives and energy blades—designed for stealth and quick strikes.

**Emily’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength**: 1.3 stars (up from 1 star)
* **Speed**: 1.5 stars (up from 1.2 stars)
* **Endurance**: 1.4 stars (up from 1.3 stars)
* **Agility**: 1.6 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Senses (Danger Detection)**: 2.0 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Survival Skills**: 1.8 stars (up from 1.6 stars)

In just two weeks, **Emily** had gained a **0.3-star** improvement in her overall abilities, but the most significant development was in her **senses**. Her heightened ability to detect danger within a 500-meter radius set her apart from most veterans. This skill would prove invaluable as she could warn the team of incoming threats before they were even visible.

**The Triplets’ Training - Synchronization Team**

The **Triplets**—**Lia**, **Luna**, and **Lena**—were a unique trio, bound not only by blood but by an unbreakable **synchronization** in their combat style. They had grown up together, fought together, and developed a bond unlike any other. Their strength and precision in battle, however, needed to be honed, and that’s where the **Synchronization Team** came in.

The Synchronization Team, a special unit trained to operate in perfect harmony, was tasked with elevating the Triplets' synergy combat. **Sergeant Arin**, a 2.6-star soldier known for his impeccable synchronization skills, led the training. Under his guidance, the Triplets would refine their ability to fight not just as individual warriors, but as a single, unified force.

**Training Focus:**

* **Combat Synchronization**: The Triplets were taught how to read each other’s movements without needing to speak. Every move they made was in sync, their attacks and defenses working together like a well-oiled machine.
* **Weapon Bonding**: The Triplets wielded special weapons—**swords and shields**—designed to complement each other. Their weapons were also modified with energy enhancements. The training focused on improving the way they used these weapons together, allowing them to execute devastating combo attacks that left their enemies with little chance to counter.
* **Team Dynamics and Battle Tactics**: The Triplets also trained to develop strategies that leveraged their unity. While the individual strength of each triplet was important, it was the way they functioned together that set them apart. Sergeant Arin put them through drills where they had to fight against larger groups of enemies, perfecting their strategy and teamwork.

**The Triplets’ Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength**: 1.7 stars (up from 1.2 stars)
* **Speed**: 1.8 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Endurance**: 1.9 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Sword/Shield)**: 2.0 stars (up from 1.7 stars)
* **Synchronization**: 2.3 stars (up from 1.8 stars)

In just two weeks, the Triplets experienced an impressive growth of **0.5 stars**, largely in their **synchronization** and **weapon proficiency**. Their new level of combat coordination and teamwork made them significantly more dangerous in battle. Their once-disjointed fighting styles had become perfectly aligned, making them an inseparable unit.

The **weapon proficiency** improvements were also noteworthy, as their connection with their swords and shields became almost instinctual. They were now ready to face stronger opponents, not as individuals but as a singular force.

**Summary:**

Both **Emily** and **the Triplets** had grown significantly in their training. **Emily**, though still young, had sharpened her senses and survival skills, becoming more dangerous than many of the base’s veterans in certain respects. **The Triplets**, on the other hand, had perfected their synchronization, becoming a devastating force when they fought together.

The training had molded them into far stronger warriors, but the challenges they faced ahead would only test their growth further.

With their abilities refined, they would soon have to prove themselves on the battlefield, where their true strength would be put to the ultimate test.

**Chapter 33: Kael's Training with Vice Commander Elise Dran**

The base was quiet in the early mornings, save for the rhythmic sound of **Kael**’s feet hitting the ground, his spear swinging through the air in perfect arcs. Today marked the first day of his training with **Vice Commander Elise Dran**, and he was already feeling the weight of the challenge ahead.

**Training Begins**

Elise Dran, a 3.5-star warrior, was as fierce and demanding as the reputation she carried. Known for her mastery of the spear, she was relentless, pushing Kael to the edge of his limits every single day. From the very first session, she demonstrated that she wouldn’t tolerate weakness. The **Vice Commander**'s training style was ruthless, focusing on pushing Kael to his absolute limits, testing his resolve and his ability to adapt.

**The Spear Techniques**

Kael was no stranger to the **spear**, but Elise’s approach was unlike anything he had ever encountered. She was methodical, showing him the nuances of each movement. Her instructions were precise, and her eyes sharp—every move she made with the spear was flawless.

* **Swing Techniques**: Kael spent hours learning to perfect his **swing** techniques. Elise explained how a spear could be used not just for thrusting but for sweeping movements that could take down multiple enemies at once. She demonstrated how to generate power from the body’s core, making each swing feel like a controlled explosion of energy.
* **Thrusting Techniques**: The thrust was fundamental, Elise stressed. She had Kael practice thrusting through the air, imagining his spear cutting through the toughest of enemies. Each time, his posture had to be perfect, his focus on the target unwavering. The thrust could end a fight in an instant if executed correctly.
* **Defensive Stance and Parrying**: Even though Kael was primarily trained in aggressive spear fighting, Elise emphasized that defense was just as important. She drilled him on how to **parry** incoming attacks and quickly follow up with a counterattack, moving like the spear was an extension of his arm.
* **Movement and Agility**: Kael quickly realized that spear fighting wasn’t just about strength—it was about agility and movement. Elise made him practice fluid, fast movements, instructing him to think of his spear as a natural extension of himself.

**The Final Day**

Two weeks had passed since the beginning of the training, and Kael’s muscles ached with exhaustion. His body had already undergone substantial changes—his arms were stronger, his movements swifter, and his reflexes sharper. But there was something different about this final day. Elise was more focused than ever, her eyes narrowed as she prepared for something Kael had never seen before.

“**Kael,**” Elise said, her voice cutting through the quiet morning air, “You’ve learned the basics. Now, I will show you something... different.”

Kael stood, his spear poised, waiting for what was to come. Elise's reputation had always made her seem untouchable, and yet here she was, about to show him something that would shake his understanding of spear fighting even more.

**The New Spear Technique: ‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves’**

Without any warning, Elise moved. Her spear was a blur as she moved with unmatched fluidity. Her posture seemed to shift with every step, and the speed with which she executed the technique was something Kael couldn’t quite process at first. The spear moved in a **circular motion**, almost like a rowing motion, flowing with such smoothness that Kael had to take a moment to understand what he was witnessing.

Elise stopped after a few moments, her breathing steady, but Kael was stunned. He had never seen anything like it. The technique had a fluidity to it that made it almost impossible to follow with his eyes. There was a flow, a natural rhythm to it that spoke of a mastery Kael couldn’t fathom yet.

“The name of this technique is **‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves,’**” Elise said, her voice calm but resolute. “It’s not a move you can simply learn through repetition. It requires **focus**—the spear must become part of the natural rhythm of your body. And when you learn it... it will carry you through battles.”

Kael took a deep breath, his heart racing from the sheer **power** and precision of what he had just witnessed.

“Can you teach me this technique?” Kael asked, his curiosity piqued. He knew Elise was no ordinary warrior, but this was something entirely new.

Elise gave him a cold, knowing look. “No. You will learn it through repetition and **intuition**. Learn it by heart. Trust your body to remember.”

Kael nodded, though a part of him felt unsettled. If Elise had just shown him a glimpse of something that strong, it meant she was not only an incredibly powerful fighter, but also someone with knowledge that was not easily shared.

**Kael’s Improvements**

Despite the grueling nature of the training, Kael had made progress—his spear skills were significantly sharper, and his overall physical capabilities had improved, albeit slightly. His improvements over the past two weeks were more focused on his **spear proficiency** than his raw physical power.

**Kael’s Physical Report (After Two Weeks of Training with Elise)**

* **Strength**: 2.9 Star (up from 2.7 Star)
* **Speed**: 2.7 Star (up from 2.5 Star)
* **Stamina**: 2.9 Star (up from 2.8 Star)
* **Endurance**: 3.2 Star (up from 3.1 Star)
* **Spear Technique**: 2.5 Star (up from 2.2 Star)
* **Mutation Traits**:  
  + **Sharp senses and heightened survival instincts.**
  + **Increased muscle mass**, greater muscle control and coordination, enabling more precise spear movements.
  + **Heightened reflexes**, aiding in quicker response times during combat.

**Conversation with Vice Commander Elise Dran**

Kael, sweat dripping from his brow, approached Elise after the final training session. He could feel the exhaustion deep in his muscles, but there was also a sense of accomplishment.

“Thank you, Vice Commander,” Kael said, standing straight. “This training has been unlike anything I’ve experienced.”

Elise glanced at him, her expression unreadable. “Don’t thank me yet. You have a long way to go. That technique—‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves’—is just one of many secrets of spear fighting. Mastery takes time. Remember that, Kael.”

He nodded, grateful for her guidance but still unsure of what the future held.

“I’ll continue to improve, no matter how hard it gets,” Kael promised.

Elise’s eyes softened for a fraction of a second before she turned away, gazing out at the training ground. “You will need every ounce of that determination. This world is unforgiving, Kael. The stronger you become, the harder the challenges will get. But if you learn to fight as one with the spear... you’ll survive.”

Kael stood in silence for a moment, absorbing her words. There was so much more to learn, and Elise had only just begun to show him the path ahead.

As he looked at **Cherry**, who was observing from the sidelines, Kael felt the weight of the journey before him. But he also felt something else—**resolve**.

The training had only just begun.

**Chapter 34: The Challenge of Command**

The training grounds had changed. What was once a place of sweat, repetition, and technique was now charged with a thick air of anticipation. Two weeks had passed—**two weeks of brutal, unrelenting growth**.

Now, Commander **Darius** stood at the center of the circular arena, the crimson sky behind him casting long shadows. His arms were crossed, his battle armor heavy with the weight of a thousand past duels. His sharp eyes scanned the group of survivors before him.

No longer mere survivors.  
No longer retreating.  
Now—**warriors**.

**“No More Retreats”**

“You’ve been forged,” Darius spoke, his voice carrying across the field like a blade cutting through silence. “This is no longer training. This is no longer hesitation. From this moment onward—**there is no retreat**. Either you stand… or you fall with your weapon in hand.”

None of them flinched.

Darius smirked. “Let’s see if the flame within you is ready to burn.”

He pointed to the group.

“One by one. Come.”

**Victor: The Unshakable Wall**

The first to step forward was **Victor**.

The ground trembled slightly as the old warrior moved with deliberate calm, his large reinforced shield strapped tightly to his arm. Darius lunged with his blade, but Victor did not flinch. **Strike after strike**, his defense absorbed the force, his body unmoving like the roots of an ancient mountain. His form was perfected—not flashy, not swift, but unyielding.

Even Darius narrowed his eyes in respect.

“Still a fortress, even after all these years,” Darius murmured.

**Maya: The Phantom’s Edge**

From stillness to a blur—**Maya**.

She vanished from sight, appearing behind Darius in a flash. Her dual daggers shimmered as she landed precise, razor-accurate slashes along the edges of Darius’s armor before he could fully turn. Her speed was supernatural, and her ability to blend into shadows now rivaled the Recon elites.

Darius chuckled mid-spin. “Impressive stealth… you’ve gone beyond just silence. You’ve become the whisper of death.”

**Garret and Marcus: The Modern Titans**

Then came the thunder—**Garret** and **Marcus**, side by side, both grinning like soldiers returning to a battlefield they loved.

Garret swung his new **energy-axe**, the ground crackling beneath each blow, the weapon surging with power and recoil-dampening precision. His strikes were faster, heavier, and enhanced with modern augmentations.

Beside him, Marcus let loose with his **rocket-powered hammer**, its propulsion allowing short bursts of explosive strikes, creating shockwaves Darius actually had to sidestep from.

The commander’s eyes lit up.

“Back in your prime, and now upgraded,” he grunted. “The battlefield missed you two.”

**David and Ethan: The Iron-Blooded Rookies**

Next were **David** and **Ethan**.

Still raw, still young—but now different. They didn’t falter. Each step forward was grounded in resolve.

They fought in coordinated bursts, using their **mutated bone weapons**—David with a bone-hardened shield and short blade, Ethan with an elongated mutated saber. They absorbed punishment and dished it back with growing awareness, their stances more stable, their instincts sharper.

“You don’t fight like rookies anymore,” Darius said with a half-smile. “You fight like men who’ve decided not to die.”

**Emily: The Watchful Storm**

**Emily** didn’t enter the ring.

Instead, she stood on the edge of the arena, eyes glowing faintly with a keen, almost preternatural awareness. Her senses, honed during Recon training, locked onto every movement, analyzing, predicting. A simulated drone threat approached the field—Emily turned, raised her hand, and threw a small blade through the air.

The drone dropped mid-flight.

Darius didn’t speak but gave her a knowing nod.  
She wasn’t there to fight.  
She was there to **warn of the storm before it ever came.**

**The Triplets: Unity in Motion**

Then came the **Triplets**—now fighting as one.

Their weapons moved like clockwork. Two with blades, one with a bone-shield. They rotated positions fluidly, covering weaknesses, creating openings. A strike aimed at one would be parried by another. They were no longer just siblings. They were a **unit**. And their synchronization was near flawless.

Darius actually had to widen his stance.

“In a few more weeks,” he said as he forced them back with a sweeping blow, “you three might be able to make me bleed.”

**Kael Steps Forward**

All motion stopped.  
The field went silent.

**Kael** walked into the arena. His spear in hand. Cherry watched silently from the edge, tail flicking.

His eyes locked with Darius. His frame steady. His body battle-hardened. His movements fluid.

Elise, watching from the observation deck, folded her arms.  
“This is the one I’m curious about…”

Darius cracked his neck.  
“No more holding back. Come at me with all you’ve got… spear against spear.”

Kael narrowed his eyes, twirling his spear into a low guard.  
The others stepped back.  
The final match of the day had begun.

**Chapter 35: The Spear Against the Storm**

The arena, though battle-worn from the duels before, now felt silent again.

All eyes were on **Kael** and **Commander Darius**—two warriors with different legacies, but the same fire in their veins. One born in the ashes of survival. The other forged through countless victories.

Kael tightened the grip on his spear.  
Cherry crouched silently, eyes wide, watching from the side.  
Darius’s massive **broadblade** gleamed under the fading crimson light.

"Ready?" the commander asked.

Kael nodded once.  
"No more holding back," he replied.

**Steel Meets Steel**

Kael moved first.

A sudden burst of speed—his spear slicing through the air in a **low horizontal sweep**, one of the new techniques taught during his ruthless training with Vice Commander **Elise Dran**. Darius met the strike with his broadblade, a thunderous clang echoing across the ground.

Darius didn’t move an inch.  
Kael slid back from the force of the parry.

“You’ve gotten stronger,” Darius noted, twirling his blade with a grin. “Let’s see how far that strength goes.”

Kael spun his spear behind him, then lunged again. **Swing. Twist. Thrust. Reverse grip. Overhead spiral.** Each move more refined, more controlled—nothing wasted.

He was no longer a wild survivor.

**He was a warrior.**

**Clash of Titans**

Darius’s fighting style was relentless—**every strike heavy**, enough to shake the ground beneath Kael’s feet. The broadblade carved through the air with power that seemed to warp the wind.

Kael gritted his teeth. He ducked under a swing that would’ve broken his spine. Rolled to the side. Slammed his spear upward into Darius’s ribs, only to be blocked by an armored elbow.

Sweat dripped. Muscles burned.  
But Kael kept moving.

**Stalemate in the Inferno**

The fight drew out.

Minutes passed. Dozens of exchanges.  
Neither backed down.

The others watched in breathless awe. Even **Garret** whispered, “That kid... he’s matching the commander blow for blow.”

**Maya** watched with narrowed eyes. **Victor** crossed his arms silently.

Darius swung with both hands, forcing Kael to slide back once more. “You’re impressive, boy,” he said. “But you still haven’t landed the hit that counts.”

Kael panted, his fingers tightening around his spear. His mind was beginning to fade into instinct—his thoughts replaced by rhythm. Movement. Pressure. The pulse of the battlefield.

**The Rowing Spear Against the Waves**

Darius lunged forward for the final strike—an overhead slam designed to knock Kael completely out of the ring.

Kael’s eyes flickered.

His feet moved…  
His hands shifted…

**He didn’t think—he remembered.**

The movement came on its own, like muscle memory embedded deep in his core.  
He lowered his stance, rotated his spear along his side, and in a fluid, flowing arc—**he unleashed the move Vice Commander Elise had shown him just once**.

**The Rowing Spear Against the Waves.**

His body followed the motion perfectly, like a boat gliding across violent tides. The spear moved with untraceable grace, cutting through Darius’s defense and striking the flat of his blade at just the right angle—**redirecting the attack**.

Kael’s momentum didn’t stop. He stepped inside the guard and thrust forward—  
—**his spear pressing firmly against Darius’s chest.**

Darius froze.  
A moment of silence.  
Then he took a single step back, raising both hands in surrender.

**The Aftermath**

Kael blinked, panting heavily.  
“What… was that?”

Darius stood still for a moment, then slowly turned his head. His eyes locked with **Elise**, watching silently from the higher platform.

She didn’t speak.  
Just looked away with a calm, unreadable expression.

Darius let out a low whistle.  
“That technique… I never expected to see it again.”

He stepped toward Kael and clapped a massive hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve beaten me fairly. Not just with power—but with something that takes most warriors decades to learn.” He grinned wide. “**Instinct. Adaptation. And the right technique at the right time.** You’ve earned this.”

Kael nodded, still catching his breath.

“Congratulations,” Darius said. “You’re no longer under my shadow. You’ve begun to cast your own.”

From the edge of the field, Cherry meowed softly, as if in applause.

Here's the **updated Star Power chart** for all main characters after their 2-week intensive training and Chapter 35 events:

**🌟 Star Power Ratings (Post-Training Phase)**

**🔱 Main Combatants**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | **2.9** | Balanced – high agility, endurance, improved spear technique |
| **Darius** | **3.5+** | Elite – power, technique, commanding aura (former frontline commander) |
| **Elise Dran** | **??? (Implied >3.8)** | Mastery in spear, mysterious advanced technique |

**🛡️ Veterans**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Victor** | **2.3** | Physical tolerance, defense, strong fortitude |
| **Maya** | **2.3** | High speed, stealth, advanced evasive combat |
| **Garret** | **2.5** | Weapon mastery (tech-axe with energy/artillery) |
| **Marcus** | **2.5** | Close-range brute combat (rocket/energy hammer) |

**🧭 Emerging Combatants**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **David** | **1.7** | Balanced modern combat (guns + bone weapons) |
| **Ethan** | **1.7** | Reflex, survival instinct, modern hybrid combat |

**🌿 Support & Specialists**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Emily** | **1.3** | Reconnaissance – danger sense, environmental awareness (500m detection) |
| **The Triplets** | **1.7 (each)** | Synchronized combat with sword/shield synergy |

**Chapter 36 – The Howl of the Tide**

The sun had long set, and silence embraced the military base like a gentle blanket. After the intense weeks of training and the final mock battles, every soul had earned their right to rest. Kael lay in his quarters, his muscles sore but relaxed, Cherry curled up beside his bed like a silent sentinel. The others were fast asleep as well—Victor’s heavy breathing rumbled like distant thunder, Maya’s breathing shallow and steady like a ghost, and the triplets huddled together on a cot, unusually quiet.

But peace never lasted long.

**"WEOOOHHHHHH—WEOOOHHHHHH—WEOOOHHHHHH—"**

The wailing sirens shattered the stillness like glass. Red emergency lights pulsed across the base walls, casting long shadows of urgency. Kael shot up immediately, Cherry already on her feet, growling low.

"Everyone up! Now!" Kael barked, grabbing his spear.

The team rushed outside into the courtyard, the once-calm night now alive with alarmed soldiers, scrambling officers, and armored vehicles being rushed into position. Floodlights lit up the assembly ground, where Commander Darius stood with Elise Dran by his side, his crutch planted firmly in the ground, eyes blazing with intensity.

Within minutes, the elite team gathered, sleep still clinging to their faces but washed away by adrenaline.

Darius stepped forward, lifting a small device to his mouth as his voice boomed through the loudspeakers.

“Listen up, all units—this is not a drill.”

A digital hologram rose beside him, projecting a massive radar map of the surrounding area.

“Approximately one hour ago, our outermost surveillance drones detected an incoming wave—what we call a **Tide**. Based on trajectory and movement analysis, we estimate that it will reach our gates within three hours.”

The map zoomed in, and multiple red dots blinked rapidly toward the base.

“This Tide is unlike what you’ve faced before. The swarm consists of:

* Over **100 1-star mutated beasts**—mostly scaled wolves, plague-hounds, and razor crows.
* **50 2-star threats**—these are larger, faster, and more aggressive. Expect mutated tigers, stinger gorillas, and molten boars.
* **5 monsters at 3-star level**—intel identifies two as elite predator types, and the others as hive mutants.
* And finally… one **4-star mutation**. We don’t know what it is yet. It’s fast. And it’s strong.”

A murmur spread across the ranks, tension thickening like smoke. Kael’s hand tightened on his spear. A 4-star mutated beast? That was close to commander-level combat power.

Darius raised his hand, silencing the murmurs.

“Now, to assignments.”

He turned his eyes to Cherry, who stood near Kael, her ruby-red eyes glowing faintly in the light.

“Cherry. You will take on the **4-star beast**. You’re the only one fast and strong enough to do this solo. Trust your instincts, and hold nothing back.”

Cherry gave a sharp nod, tail flicking once, then settled into her usual crouch.

“Commander Elise Dran, Kael, and I will each take down one **3-star monster**. These will be spread across different sectors. Our job is to neutralize them quickly and then assist others.”

Elise stood calm and composed beside Darius, but Kael saw a flash of anticipation in her eyes.

“The remaining **two 3-star monsters** will be handled by Victor, Maya, Garret, Marcus, and four senior sergeants. Form two sub-teams of four. Do not try to fight alone—these monsters are too coordinated.”

Darius turned to the younger members of the team.

“David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets—you’ll each be assigned within units that will face **2-star beasts**. These units will be composed of 8–10 fighters with strengths ranging from 1.5 to 2 stars. Your job isn’t just to kill. It’s to protect your team. Stick together, use formations, and rotate the front lines.”

He looked straight at Emily.

“Emily—you’ll be on recon duty as well. Use your sense radius to alert teams of incoming threats. Stay mobile. You’re not to engage unless necessary.”

She nodded, her expression dead serious.

“The remaining **100 1-star beasts** will be handled by our bulk forces—troops below 1-star power, with mechanized support and auto-turrets. If any of you finish your task early—**reinforce the 1-star or 2-star units. Help where it counts.**”

Garret cracked his knuckles. “It’s like the old days, huh?”

Marcus grinned. “Except now we have better toys.”

David adjusted his gun. “Let’s prove we’re not rookies anymore.”

Kael, meanwhile, looked around at his team—each member now armed not just with weapons, but experience, growth, and unity. This wasn’t the broken crew that had staggered into the base weeks ago. They had become soldiers.

Elise walked up to Kael quietly as Darius continued issuing tactical layouts to the rest.

“You ready?” she asked.

Kael looked at her, his eyes calm. “More than ever.”

She glanced at Cherry. “And her?”

Kael smiled. “She was always ready.”

Darius clapped his hands once, drawing all attention back.

“This is no longer about survival. This is a test of everything we’ve learned. Defend the base. Protect your comrades. Show these beasts why humanity still stands.”

The soldiers roared back in unified agreement.

“Dismissed. Gear up. One hour till impact.”

As the team scattered to prepare, Kael looked to the stars above. The night no longer felt quiet—but rather like the breath before a storm.

**Chapter 37 – The Spear and the Storm**

The armory buzzed with tension. The smell of oil, metal, and polish hung thick in the air as soldiers lined up, receiving their equipment for the coming war. The clanging of crates being unlocked, weapons being issued, and power armor adjusting echoed against the steel walls.

Commander Darius stood at the center of it all, his presence a silent command. With each team member that approached, he opened a large black case and handed over a weapon—crafted and tailored for them after observing their two weeks of training.

To **Victor**, he handed a shield the size of a door, made of dense neutron-forged alloy, its surface etched with ancient rune patterns for impact absorption.

To **Maya**, he offered two curved daggers coated with a reactive stealth polymer that shimmered like glass when held still—perfect for her silent, quick movements.

**Garret and Marcus** received twin gauntlets and dual cleavers, respectively—reinforced with kinetic energy conduits that allowed bursts of force on contact.

**David and Ethan** received reinforced power blades and magnetic pulse rifles—perfected for agile frontline movement and mid-range combat.

The **Triplets** were handed custom-forged weapons: one carried a broadsword with channeling grooves for electricity, another a shield enhanced with kinetic pulse absorption, and the third wielded a compact halberd tuned for synchronized striking patterns.

And then, the room hushed.

Darius turned to Kael but didn’t open the next case. Instead, he stepped aside.

“Yours will be given by someone else,” he said, voice gruff.

From the far end of the hall, **Vice Commander Elise Dran** stepped forward.

She carried a long cloth-covered object in both hands—taller than Kael himself. Her stride was steady, deliberate, eyes locked on him with an unreadable expression.

The moment she stopped before him, she removed the cloth.

Kael’s breath caught in his throat.

The weapon she revealed was unlike anything he had ever seen.

It was a **spear**, nearly 6’1” in length—**his own height**, forged from the **bones of a Blue Panther-class 3-Star monster**. Its shaft shimmered with an **iridescent deep blue hue**, smooth and cool like liquid night. The material was tough yet oddly flexible, able to absorb impact without cracking.

The spearhead, however, was where the weapon truly stood out.

Made from **a precious hybrid alloy** of vibranium-titanite and laced with crystal-threaded obsidian, it gleamed with a piercing **silver-blue shine**. Carved into it were ancient markings that faintly pulsed, reacting to Kael’s presence as if alive.

The blade's edge curved subtly—like the fin of a predatory fish cutting through waves—perfectly balanced between thrust and slash.

“The weapon doesn’t have a name,” Elise said softly. “You’ll give it one when you earn it.”

Kael looked up at her, eyes wide. “This… this is forged from monster bone?”

“Not just any monster,” Elise said. “A Blue Panther. A 3-star predator that was known to be unkillable in the wild. I led the mission to bring it down. It nearly cost me my life.”

Kael gently ran his hand along the shaft, the smoothness of it strange against his callused skin. “It feels... alive.”

“That’s because it is. Or at least, it remembers,” she replied.

Kael looked into her eyes. “Why me?”

Elise studied him for a moment.

“You’ve grown faster than anyone I’ve seen. But it’s not just your strength—it’s your resilience, your hunger, your refusal to break.” She paused. “This weapon wasn’t meant for just anyone. It chooses the one who will carry it with purpose. That’s you.”

He gripped the spear fully now, testing its balance. It was perfect. Every movement felt fluid, like the spear was an extension of his arm. A part of him.

“And the spear technique you showed me?” Kael asked. “Was it yours?”

Elise didn’t answer immediately. She stepped closer and whispered, “That technique was never meant to be taught to anyone outside the Dran lineage. I showed it to you once. You remembered it. You used it in battle.” She tilted her head slightly, a soft smirk forming. “That’s why I gave you this weapon. Because you’re already walking the path.”

Kael nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

“I’ll master that technique. And this spear.”

Elise’s voice grew quiet. “Mastery is not about control. It’s about surrendering to the rhythm of the fight. This spear won’t respond to brute strength. You’ll have to dance with it—**like rowing against waves**.”

He grinned. “Then I’ll dance until the tide breaks.”

She chuckled lightly—a rare sound.

“Good. Now go. The battlefield won’t wait.”

As Kael turned to leave, Elise placed a hand briefly on his shoulder.

“And Kael,” she said, her voice lower now. “Whatever happens out there—don’t die. That spear is meant to change the course of something far bigger than this battle.”

He met her gaze. “I won’t.”

The team regrouped outside, fully geared, their new weapons gleaming in the floodlights. Kael’s blue spear stood out like a lightning bolt waiting to strike.

The sirens had stopped. Now, only the silence of waiting remained.

The Tide was coming.

**Chapter 38 – The Beast Tide: Part 1**

The skies were a dull gray, smeared with the smoky haze of dawn. A wind blew across the barren stretch in front of the military base, stirring dust into the air and making banners flap violently. The earth trembled—not with fear, but anticipation.

Every soldier was in position. The defense line had been drawn, and no one dared cross it prematurely. Tension buzzed like electricity in the air.

**Kael** stood near the **southern border**, eyes fixed ahead. He gripped his new blue spear with both hands, the weapon seeming to pulse with life. He could sense the others nearby—Victor at the northern line, Maya cloaked within the shadows of the inner walls, Garret and Marcus manning the mid-flank alongside other officers, while the triplets and others stood ready with their squads. **Cherry**, calm yet alert, sat perched atop the highest wall, her eyes glowing faintly—fixed on the horizon.

And then it happened.

A long, deep **horn** echoed through the valley—**the Call to War**.

From the forested darkness ahead, shadows spilled out like a flood. The beasts came.

A wave of **one-star mutated monsters**—over a hundred of them—charged forward. The ground quaked beneath their feet, their monstrous forms shrieking, roaring, and screeching in a chaotic chorus of rage.

Their bodies were grotesque: twisted wolves with armored hides, serpents that slithered on muscular limbs, bears with glowing red eyes and jagged bone protrusions, lizards with hardened rock-like scales, and even giant hornets the size of war dogs.

And to meet them…

The soldiers below 1 Star rating surged forward with a cry of defiance.

They were clad in **light exo-armor**, tuned to enhance reaction speed and durability. In their hands were a diverse arsenal of **energy weapons**:

* **Energy Swords**: Blades that glowed with a high-frequency energy field, capable of cutting through tough monster hide. Some crackled with electric arcs, others glowed plasma-red with heat.
* **Plasma Rifles**: Standard-issue among ranged fighters. With adjustable barrels, these rifles shot concentrated bursts of plasma energy that exploded on impact, leaving glowing scorch marks on anything they touched.
* **Energy Bombs**: Small, disk-like grenades that pulsed with white-blue light. When thrown, they would levitate for a second before discharging a radial shockwave, disrupting groups of monsters and breaking formations.
* **Magneto-Lances**: Thrust-based weapons that, upon impact, released a powerful repelling magnetic pulse capable of tearing through flesh or hurling enemies back.
* **Cryo-Arrows and Shock Darts**: Archers stood on the backlines, launching arrows tipped with cryo-capsules that froze limbs upon contact or darts that sent jarring voltage through nerves.
* **Auto-Combat Drones**: A few tech-based soldiers deployed shoulder-mounted drones—buzzing machines armed with mini-lasers and stun nets to distract or wound enemies from above.

The first clash was brutal.

A spear-wielding soldier lunged at a charging tusked boar, stabbing its shoulder—but the beast swung wildly and crushed him against a rock. A trio of gunners held their ground, mowing down a pack of mutant hyenas with well-timed bursts. An energy bomb exploded under a leaping lizard, blasting it apart mid-air.

Screams, roars, and flashes of blue and red energy filled the battlefield. Blood splattered the dirt. Dust thickened into a cloud. But no one retreated.

Behind them, the other warriors waited.

Kael stood perfectly still, watching every movement—memorizing the enemy’s speed, behavior, and aggression.

Nearby, **Commander Darius** stood calmly with his arms crossed, watching the front line absorb the first wave. “Let them fight,” he muttered. “Only when they bleed will they understand the cost.”

**Elise** stood to his right, hands on her hips, sharp eyes scanning for pattern or anomaly. Her twin spears rested on her back.

“They’ll hold,” she said coldly. “The real storm hasn’t arrived yet.”

Kael tightened his grip.

“Not yet,” he murmured. “But soon.”

And just then, his eyes caught a shifting ripple on the horizon.

The **second wave** was coming.

And it would be worse.

**Chapter 39 – The Beast Tide: Part 2**

The bodies of the fallen one-star monsters hadn’t even cooled when the air shifted—thicker, heavier, deadlier.

A **deafening howl** pierced the chaos, followed by thunderous stomps that shook the very foundation of the base. From the veil of mist and death emerged the **second wave**—fifty **2-Star mutated beasts**, each larger, more grotesque, and radiating a dangerous aura. Their eyes glowed with primal rage and unnatural intelligence.

The frontline defenders had barely caught their breath.

But now, it was time for the **real fighters** to move.

“SECOND LINE—ADVANCE!” Darius’s voice roared like thunder across the camp.

Kael watched silently as the chosen troops sprinted forward—ten teams, each designated to handle five of the elite beasts.

At the forefront of one squad was **David**, his greatsword humming with blue energy as he moved with precise discipline. Beside him, **Ethan**, wielding dual short axes crackling with electricity, crouched low and agile, ready to strike.

Not far from them, the **Triplets**—Riven, Lira, and Alric—moved in perfect synchrony, their formation tight, unwavering. Riven led with the shield, Lira behind with her piercing sword, and Alric channeled energy blasts from a mid-range position with a gauntlet cannon.

**Emily**, younger and smaller than all, moved alone—but never aimlessly. She watched, listened, and felt the battlefield’s rhythm. Her eyes scanned the monsters before they even emerged fully. Her senses guided her movements like instinct—danger within 500 meters couldn’t touch her unseen.

**David’s Squad:**

A **mutated rhinoceros** with molten cracks along its skin charged forward, its horn glowing faintly with burning heat. David raised his sword high and roared, “FLANK AND STRIKE!”

The beast barreled toward them like a freight train. David stood firm—**immovable**—before pivoting with trained precision. His greatsword met the beast’s horn with a **shockwave**, both forces clashing in a display of raw power.

“Now, Ethan!”

Ethan leapt from the side, spinning mid-air as his twin axes cleaved through the beast’s exposed flank. Sparks flew. The monster howled, kicking wildly.

Another leap—this time Ethan rolled beneath the creature, slicing its underbelly.

David followed with a brutal **vertical slash**, severing its foreleg.

It crashed with a cry, and David finished it with a clean blow to the head. Blood sprayed, steaming as it hit the ground.

“One down,” Ethan muttered, panting.

“Four to go,” David said grimly, already scanning for the next.

**Triplets' Battle:**

Elsewhere, a **five-legged tiger-beast** with spiked tails and glowing purple veins descended on the triplets. It was fast—faster than most—and its claws left streaks of poison on the stone floor.

“Shield lock!” Riven shouted.

He raised his reinforced shield just as the monster pounced. The beast crashed into it, but the force only pushed Riven back an inch.

“Open!”

With flawless timing, he shifted aside—**Lira's sword** flashed under the beast’s chin, drawing blood. The tiger roared, spinning wildly—but **Alric’s energy blast** slammed into its ribs, throwing it off balance.

“Circle it—don’t let it rest!” Lira commanded.

The triplets moved like a single organism—never crossing paths, never hesitating.

They whittled it down. Cut by cut. Blast by blast.

And then, with one final sequence, Riven pinned it, Lira pierced its heart, and Alric stunned it dead with a focused shot.

“Enemy neutralized,” Alric said coldly.

Lira wiped her blade clean. “Next.”

**Emily’s Encounter:**

At the edge of the formation, **Emily** moved in a blur. She didn't attack—she didn’t need to. A **mantis-like beast** with sickle-arms and jet black chitin had targeted her. But every time it lunged, she was already gone.

She moved with elegance, like a dancer.

The beast’s strikes sliced empty air.

“Too slow,” she whispered, sidestepping again.

She didn’t strike back—she only maneuvered, dodged, analyzed. The creature’s frustration grew.

She lured it toward the trenches, leading it through spikes, into energy fields—turning the environment into her weapon. And just when the beast stumbled for a moment—

**Boom!**

A plasma turret hidden in the wall activated, vaporizing it in an instant.

Emily stood still, hair rustling from the force.

She exhaled. “Eliminated.”

The rest of the 2-Star teams pushed on.

Screams echoed. Roars shook the earth. Bodies fell. But the soldiers held their line.

Kael, still watching, felt something awaken inside him.

They were warriors now.

The **true battle**, though, had yet to come.

**Chapter 40 – The Beast Tide: Part 3**

The air rippled. The earth vibrated. A heavy silence fell across the battlefield—as if the very world held its breath.

And then it came.

The **roar** was unlike anything heard before—deep, ancient, and filled with bloodlust. It wasn’t just a sound; it was a **warning**.

From the fog of death emerged five monstrous shapes.

**The 3-Star Mutants Had Arrived.**

First slithering in was a **mutated serpent**, its **scales like obsidian armor**, glistening with a slick sheen of venom. It was **as thick as a car** and long enough to coil around a building. Fanged and silent, it moved with haunting grace, its yellow eyes scanning for prey. *A whisper of death.*

Second came the **mutated panther**—its body sleek and rippling with muscle, **twice the size** of any 2-Star beast before it. Its **midnight-black fur shimmered** with strange energy, and its tail swayed like a blade. With each step, it left claw marks burned into the earth. *A shadow in motion.*

Then above, circling in the stormy skies, came **two mutated eagles**—each **as tall as a two-story building**, their wingspans casting wide shadows across the field. Their feathers were sharp like blades, talons like spears, and beaks that dripped acid. The sky screamed as they descended. *Death from above.*

And finally, crashing through shattered trees, came the **mutated bear**—a **monolith of muscle and rage**, towering **as tall as a three-story building**. Its fur was spiked and matted with dried blood. Its eyes glowed like embers, and every step shook the ground. Its claws could tear tanks. *An unstoppable force.*

All five monsters spread across the front, standing **200 to 300 meters apart**, challenging the defenders with silent menace.

Across the camp, the **elite troops assembled**.

**“Don’t die,” Elise said softly.**

Her words weren’t dramatic, just **quietly genuine**. She glanced at Kael, her eyes lingering longer than usual, before turning to face the serpent alone. Her calm presence was unnerving—as though she’d already accepted what might come.

**“CHARGE!” roared Darius.**

The commander dashed forward, his **broadblade held high**, energy coiling around him like a storm. He called out as he moved, his voice carrying across the chaos:

“HOLD YOUR GROUND! FIGHT WITH EVERYTHING! THE FATE OF THIS WALL—RESTS ON YOU!”

His body was like a battering ram of sheer will, rushing directly toward the mutated panther.

Behind him, **Cherry**, sleek and poised, gave Kael one last look. Not a goodbye, but an assurance. Her feline eyes sparkled with certainty—*she would win*. And then, in a blur of silver-white fur, she vanished toward her prey.

Kael felt the air thicken.

This was it.

He clenched the shaft of his new spear—the blue shimmer pulsing faintly as if alive. Then, without a word, he sprinted toward the beast that awaited him.

The **mutated bear** had already begun its slow, thundering walk forward. Its head lowered like a battering ram, its growl low and ancient.

Kael narrowed his eyes.

“You’re mine.”

To the sides, the two teams assigned to the **mutated eagles** activated their aerial assault gear—grappling lifts and propulsion boosters fired as they launched into the sky, prepared to fight death itself in midair.

Below, Elise calmly stepped into the field of the massive serpent. Her spear twirled once. She closed her eyes for a moment, exhaled, then opened them with deadly focus.

**And then… the ground broke again.**

A thunderclap of raw energy rolled over the battlefield.

From the far edge of the wasteland, rising over the shattered remains of ruined trees, came a **colossal shadow**.

Its mane glowed with golden plasma. Its body was shaped like a feline, but **larger than a war tank**, every muscle precise and deadly. Its **eyes burned like molten gold**, and its **roar shattered glass** across the base.

The soldiers stopped breathing.

A 4-Star Mutated Monster had arrived.

**The Mutated Lion — apex of the beast tide.**

And across from it stood **Cherry**, a quiet growl in her throat, her stance firm. She didn’t blink. She didn’t falter.

Two predators. One bloodline.

One destined battle.

The horns blared again.

The tide had reached its peak.

And now… the true war began.

**Chapter 41 – The Beast Tide: Part 4**

The sky was no longer blue. It had become a **war zone**.

Screeches thundered from above as the **two mutated eagles**, titanic in scale, circled over the battlefield. Their eyes gleamed like molten copper, scanning the chaos below with vicious hunger. **Wingspans over thirty meters wide** beat against the air, causing whirlwinds that flung debris across the field.

Each beat of their wings could send a grown man flying.

Each talon could crush steel.

Each scream shook the hearts of those listening.

And yet, rising to meet them, **two elite troops** soared into the sky—fueled by jetpack thrusters and energy grappling cables that hissed with fire and light.

They had **one mission**: neutralize the aerial threat.

**Team Alpha: Led by Sergeant Lyn and Marcus**

Marcus soared like a cannonball, gripping his dual-edged plasma sabers, both pulsing neon blue. His armor had been upgraded with aerial stabilizers, and his visor tracked the eagle’s movements with microsecond precision.

“Engage the right eagle! Split the formation!” Lyn commanded through their headsets.

Behind him, three other elite fighters followed suit—one wielding a long-range plasma rifle, one with energy-thread bolas, and the last with compact drone deployers.

The eagle on the right—the larger of the two—screeched and **dove like a missile**, talons stretched wide.

“Marcus! Break its dive!” Lyn shouted.

Without hesitation, Marcus rocketed upwards, **barreling headfirst into its path**. Just before impact, he twisted sideways and **slashed one saber** across the beast’s wing-joint.

A spray of **thick, black blood** erupted—but it wasn’t enough to stop the descent.

The eagle roared and clipped him with a wing, sending Marcus spiraling through the air.

“Marcus!” Lyn barked. “Recover!”

“I’m good—I’m good!” Marcus grunted, stabilizing his flight seconds before crashing into a broken tower.

The eagle swooped again, this time aiming for Lyn himself. The sergeant activated a **decoy flare**, exploding in blinding white light. The eagle reeled back, giving the sniper a window.

“Now!” Lyn called.

The sniper, perched on a floating drone platform, took the shot. A **crimson bolt** fired and struck the eagle **directly in its left eye**, causing it to shriek and jerk mid-flight.

It didn’t fall—but it bled.

They were making progress.

**Team Beta: Led by Sergeant Nara and Garret**

Garret's weapon—a hybrid **energy crossbow** with explosive tips—glowed with pulsing red heat. Unlike Marcus’s direct rush, Garret played from mid-range, sending precise volleys that danced between wind and chaos.

Their eagle was **faster**—sleeker in build, and viciously intelligent.

It had already learned from its sibling’s injury. It dodged and twisted with impossible agility, making it hard to land a hit.

Sergeant Nara wasn’t deterred.

“Form spiral assault pattern!” she ordered.

Her team moved like gears in a machine. One soared above the eagle to distract it, another fired magnetic grapples that anchored into clouds of ionized mist, restricting the eagle’s freedom of movement. A third deployed a **gravity pulse mine** mid-air.

The eagle, frustrated, lashed out—its wings slicing through the mist and sending two soldiers tumbling. One caught herself with her stabilizer, but the other screamed as he plummeted.

“Hold tight, Leo!” Garret shouted.

He dived and fired a grapple from his wrist, snagging Leo mid-fall and yanking him back to safety. The crossbow spun once on his back and fired another shot mid-spin—**striking the eagle’s flank**. The arrow exploded in flame, staggering the monster in midair.

The beast roared, pain evident in its screech.

“Nice shot!” Nara yelled, flying past him with twin blasters roaring.

The eagle retaliated fast—it **flapped hard**, generating a concussive shockwave that scattered the team. Then it spiraled into a barrel roll and crashed into one of the floating towers that Team Beta had been using for support.

The **entire structure exploded**, raining molten metal and electric fire down upon the field.

**Back to Team Alpha**

Marcus had returned, bloodied but fired up.

He soared behind the wounded eagle and **jammed both sabers** into its spine. The monster shrieked and bucked, sending him flying—but the damage was real.

Its flight faltered.

Sergeant Lyn soared in next, firing his grappling hook and **latching onto the eagle’s wing bone**. He crawled along it like a spider as the eagle flailed wildly, trying to shake him off.

“Do it, Kael,” Lyn whispered to himself. “We’ll hold the sky.”

Then he drew a small **energy blade** from his waist—specifically tuned to disrupt nerve centers.

He drove it into the wing joint, right into the sensitive cluster his visor had marked.

The eagle screamed again—a cry that echoed across the battlefield.

The beast was now fighting with only **one usable wing**, spinning in a chaotic tumble through the skies.

**Team Beta’s Eagle Responds**

Despite its injuries, the second eagle had grown **even more aggressive**.

It had begun using **sonic shrieks**, compressing energy into soundwaves that battered their ears and shook their gear apart.

Garret was struggling to aim—his ears bleeding, his HUD glitching.

Then he saw it: the eagle was circling around to attack **the command center**.

“IT’S GOING FOR THE BASE!” Nara shouted.

“I’ll intercept!” Garret yelled.

He activated **all boosters**, flying faster than he ever had. His crossbow rotated and hummed. He drew one of the **experimental explosive arrows** Darius had handed out.

He locked on.

Fired.

The arrow flew.

The eagle turned.

But the arrow struck—not its body—but the **energy sac under its neck**. The resulting explosion sent a massive burst of fire and light, temporarily **blinding** the eagle and pushing it off course.

It didn’t fall.

But it turned back.

Now it was angry.

Garret could see it—**its eyes were on him**.

“Here we go…” he whispered.

**The Battle Continues…**

As explosions tore across the skies, and wings clashed with swords, the battle between the elite troops and the eagles had become an aerial war of attrition—**strategy versus savagery**, agility versus raw strength.

Neither side had fallen yet.

But the sky was no longer a safe place.

And the battle had only just begun.

**Chapter 42 – The Beast Tide: Part 5**

The battlefield pulsed with the rhythm of chaos, but Elise walked forward as though none of it touched her. The wind fluttered through her silver hair. Her boots struck the ground with calm precision. She was alone—purposefully. Her squad had been ordered to support the outer line. **This fight was hers alone.**

Across from her, slithering through the broken terrain like a nightmare uncoiling, came the **mutated serpent**.

It was easily **twenty meters long**, its scales glistening like obsidian metal under the flashes of battle. Each movement of its body dragged gashes through the ground, and its yellow eyes glowed like twin coals. The mutated snake flicked out a **forked tongue laced with green steam**—venom so potent it had melted concrete where it dripped.

But Elise showed no fear.

Only stillness.

The snake hissed violently and lunged forward with a speed that blurred.

Elise lifted her palm.

A shimmer of blue light pulsed from her wrist—the activation of her **energy blade fan**. A metallic hiss unfolded the weapon into five radiant, bladed wings shaped like a blooming flower. They hovered behind her, spinning silently.

The snake came close—**and then vanished in a blur of motion.**

It was fast. **Too fast for ordinary eyes.**

But Elise wasn't ordinary.

“Predictable,” she murmured.

She sidestepped with supernatural grace, the blade fan reacting to her thoughts. It spun around her in a fluid orbit, slicing into the snake's midsection as it tried to pass.

The steel-hard scales cracked with a shriek. Black blood sprayed into the air—but Elise had already moved.

She launched upward into a half-somersault, landing on a crumbled rooftop just a dozen meters away. Her eyes flicked sideways for a moment—toward the southern quarter of the battlefield.

From this angle, she could see him.

**Kael.**

He stood before the towering **mutated bear**, a monster that dwarfed even the buildings around it. And yet, Kael held his ground. His **blue spear** shimmered with power, and he readied himself with the same determination she had seen that night during the storm.

Elise’s eyes softened briefly.

“Don’t lose, Kael,” she whispered. “I want to fight you someday.”

A hiss tore her attention back. The snake had coiled into a **tornado of rage**, spinning violently with its tail lashing like a whip.

It struck at the building she stood upon, collapsing it in an instant.

Elise jumped effortlessly, flipping through the air as debris rained below. Her energy fan formed a protective shield that deflected falling stone. She landed atop the serpent’s own body.

The beast thrashed—furious.

“You don’t get to interrupt me,” she said flatly.

She plunged her palm downward.

One of the blade-wings darted forward and **embedded itself** into the serpent’s spine. The creature screamed, its body convulsing. Elise backflipped off as it crashed into the ground, thrashing violently.

The earth cracked beneath its weight.

Still alive. Still fighting.

Elise landed again and rolled her neck slowly.

“You’re disappointing,” she said with a sigh.

The snake suddenly **snapped its jaws forward**, releasing a **stream of toxic mist** from glands beneath its fangs. The venom hissed as it spread, melting the ground and nearby trees.

Elise brought her hands together, and the energy blades formed a shield dome in front of her. The mist splashed against it—and dissolved harmlessly.

When it cleared, she was still standing.

Untouched.

Unshaken.

She narrowed her eyes and sent the blades darting out in wide arcs, slicing shallow cuts across the serpent’s sides from multiple angles. The snake responded by burrowing—its massive body disappearing beneath the surface in seconds.

Silence.

She closed her eyes.

The ground vibrated.

A moment later, the snake **burst up from the earth directly beneath her**—a clever ambush.

But Elise was already in the air, rising like a petal on the wind. Her blades converged downward, striking the serpent mid-lunge. A direct hit to the face.

A spray of dark blood followed.

Still, the serpent twisted and coiled mid-air—biting toward her in desperation.

She reached back and summoned her final blade—**the core fan blade**, etched with her personal crest. She spun it in hand like a discus and hurled it straight down.

It struck the serpent’s open mouth—wedging into the roof of its jaw and sparking violently.

The monster shrieked, reeling backward, its mouth slamming shut in pain.

Elise landed calmly once more, breathing slowly.

“You’re durable,” she admitted. “But I’m not done testing you yet.”

Far off, she glanced again—Kael now locked in fierce battle with the towering bear. She watched as he was flung back through a wall, only to rise again, spear in hand, blood trailing from his cheek.

“Don’t lose,” she whispered again. “Because if you do… I’ll kill that thing for you.”

Her blades returned to her sides like loyal wings, orbiting quietly, hungry for the final blow.

The serpent, wounded but far from dead, slithered around her in a wide circle—now cautious, aware it had underestimated this woman.

But Elise only smiled faintly.

The sky cracked again with thunder—another eagle had screamed. The battle raged on around them, chaos swallowing the world whole.

But in Elise’s part of the field, there was only **one predator**.

And she wasn’t done hunting yet.

**Chapter 43 – The Beast Tide: Part 6**

The sound of battle echoed through the broken plains like a storm of war drums. But amidst the chaos, **Darius stood steady**, his massive broadblade resting across his shoulder, the wind catching his dark cape. His eyes, seasoned and sharp, focused on the beast that had leapt into the battlefield with silent fury—**a mutated panther**, twice the size of its already terrifying 2-star kin.

Its shoulders rippled with muscle. Its obsidian-black fur shimmered with an oily gleam, absorbing light. Four eyes blinked—two above, two below—and glowed a sinister red. Its tail lashed once, cracking the air like a whip, and its claws gouged into the earth as it circled.

**Darius shifted his weight to his prosthetic leg**—a sleek alloy limb fitted beneath his combat gear. The servos whirred softly, keeping perfect balance.

“Come on, then,” Darius said, voice gravel-thick. “Let’s dance.”

With a snarl that shook the air, the panther launched.

It moved like shadow—**silent, swift, deadly.**

But Darius was ready.

He rolled to the side just as claws carved through where he had stood. Dirt and stone exploded into the air. Before the panther could land fully, Darius swung his massive blade upward in a wide arc. The edge caught the panther’s flank, slicing a shallow gash and sending it tumbling sideways with a furious growl.

“Hmm. You bleed,” Darius muttered, cracking his neck. “Good.”

The beast snarled, its tail lashing again. It circled faster, fangs bared, blood trickling from its side.

This time, it struck with a **feint**—flicking its tail toward Darius’s face, and then twisting its body mid-air for a clawed rake.

The tail hit.

Darius grunted as it snapped across his jaw, drawing blood. But he didn’t falter.

Instead, he **planted his prosthetic leg** deep into the ground, pivoted, and slammed his shoulder into the incoming beast’s side. The two collided with a thunderous crash.

The panther recoiled, momentarily stunned.

Darius exhaled. Blood ran from his cheek and temple, but his grip on the blade was as steady as ever.

“You hit hard,” he said. “But I’ve bled for years longer than you’ve lived.”

The panther leapt high—its form a blur of muscle and claws.

Darius **threw his blade** into the air.

In the split second of surprise from the beast, Darius launched himself forward, grabbed the blade mid-air, and **slammed it downward** with both hands in a devastating vertical slash.

The panther twisted—only partially avoiding it.

The blade still landed a grazing hit, splitting fur and skin across its shoulder.

The beast roared and staggered back.

Darius landed, rolled to one knee, and wiped blood from his chin.

His **prosthetic knee hissed**, absorbing the shock with mechanical precision.

He rose again.

Around him, the battlefield burned with distant fights—the roars of monsters, the clash of energy weapons—but here, in his corner of war, it was just him and the panther.

His voice dropped to a murmur, audible only to the wind:

“I’ve seen beasts stronger than you. I’ve buried them, too.”

The panther’s red eyes narrowed. It let out a low snarl, stalking left and right, probing his stance. Then, with terrifying speed, it surged again—this time faster, more furious.

Its claws struck the blade.

**Sparks flew.**

Its fangs snapped inches from Darius’s throat. But the old commander twisted his body at the last second, catching the beast’s lower jaw with the flat of his blade and **slamming his mechanical leg into its ribs** with a thunderous crack.

The panther yowled and recoiled—but not before raking its claws across Darius’s left arm.

He hissed as **blood sprayed**, his coat torn open.

“Heh. That one got through,” he said, glancing at the cut. “Not bad.”

He spat blood onto the ground.

The panther’s four eyes locked onto his, and for a moment, **man and beast simply stared**.

A standoff.

Both wounded. Both furious. Neither backing down.

Then, from behind him, a voice cut through the comms.

“Darius! Are you alright?” It was Elise’s voice—calm, but with a thread of concern.

Darius tapped the side of his earpiece.

“Still breathing, girl. Focus on your snake.”

“Copy that,” she replied softly.

He clicked off and narrowed his eyes again.

The panther growled low.

“Now,” Darius muttered. “Let’s finish round two.”

**Chapter 44 – The Beast Tide: Part 7**

The ground trembled beneath Kael’s boots.

He stood his ground near the fractured edge of the base perimeter, his new blue spear gleaming with a soft shimmer under the ash-hued sky. A deep rumble echoed across the battlefield, and then—**the mutated bear appeared.**

**Three stories tall**, its shadow alone cast darkness across the scorched land. Its fur was matted and steel-like, thick with a natural armor that shimmered faintly—its **natural defense was monstrous**. Glowing red cracks pulsed beneath its skin, like magma moving under the surface of stone. With each step, the very earth cracked beneath its weight.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Here it comes.”

The monster didn’t roar.

It just charged—**a wall of flesh and fury.**

Kael rolled aside just in time to avoid being crushed. A monstrous paw **slammed into the earth**, carving a crater with sheer force. The impact sent a shockwave rippling out, throwing chunks of stone and debris skyward.

He moved quickly, his spear already tracing silver arcs through the air.

*“The Rowing Spear Against the Waves.”*

He thrust—precise and fast. The spear’s blue tip crashed into the bear’s side—**and bounced off**, leaving only a scratch.

Kael’s eyes widened. *“That… should’ve pierced it.”*

He jumped back, evading a paw swipe that would have crushed a tank.

“Is this really a 3-star monster?” he muttered aloud.

The bear turned, red eyes glowing with intelligence and rage. Then it moved again—this time faster.

Kael barely managed to raise his spear in time. The **second blow connected**.

His spear blocked—but the **force flung him across the battlefield**.

He crashed into a stone wall, smashing through it and skidding several meters before stopping. His ribs ached, dust covered his face, and blood trickled from his lip.

“Ugh… no ordinary 3-star,” he groaned, staggering to his feet.

He glanced to the side.

Far in the distance, he could see flashes of **Elise’s battle**, the glint of her twin sabers slicing through the serpent-like monster. Further off, a trail of sparks marked **Darius’s duel** with the massive panther. Two other locations flared with clashing energy—where the two mutated eagles fought against the joint troops.

Only **Cherry’s battlefield** was **invisible**. Just a terrifying hum and distant thuds echoed, shaking the sky.

Kael narrowed his eyes. “That sound… that pressure. That’s not just a 4-star monster. No wonder she’s handling it alone.”

But he didn’t have time to dwell. The bear was already charging again.

Kael gritted his teeth and rolled sideways again. This time he **used his footwork, pivoting mid-dash**, and lashed out with a horizontal strike—**“Three Tide Cleave”**.

The spear drew a brilliant blue arc—*whomp!*

The edge met the bear’s shoulder and cut deeper than before—**but still, only shallow.** Its hide was like tempered steel.

Kael leapt back and switched his stance.

“Your defense… it's insane. This isn't a regular 3-star. Not even close,” he muttered.

He activated the portable scanner on his bracer again—expecting confirmation.

The display flickered. “...Star Power: 3.3...”

“Figures,” Kael exhaled. “A miscalculated scan.”

The bear raised both claws and **slammed them into the earth**, sending a massive shockwave rippling outwards. Kael jumped into the air, flipping mid-spin, and landed on a broken stone pillar.

“Alright,” he whispered to himself. “No more testing.”

He gathered his breath and shifted into a deep stance. His grip tightened on the spear.

“Let’s go, for real this time.”

**He dashed forward.**

The bear swung—Kael ducked and twisted, slipping beneath the arm and **striking upward with a rising spiral thrust**. The spear hummed, blue light swirling along the shaft.

*“Spear Surge – Drifting Break!”*

It struck the bear’s underside—where the armor was thinner.

The monster let out a bellowing roar—the first true sound of pain it had made.

Kael landed behind it, already bleeding from a cut above his brow.

The bear turned slowly, more cautious now. It recognized that this human—unlike many—could **hurt it**.

It lunged again, claws slicing downward. Kael blocked, but was pushed back several meters—his boots grinding against stone.

Kael breathed heavily.

Small cuts adorned his arms, and bruises were forming across his chest.

But his eyes burned with **focus**.

“You’re stronger,” he said between breaths. “But I’ve trained for this.”

The bear roared again and charged, its massive weight barreling forward.

Kael lowered his stance—and then stepped in.

Their clash shook the battlefield once more.

**Chapter 45 – The Beast Tide: Part 8**

The battlefield smelled of blood, smoke, and the dry scent of scorched dirt.

Kael panted, sweat glistening down his brow, stinging the shallow cut above his eye. His grip tightened around the smooth, cool shaft of his blue spear, the shimmering weapon humming as if sensing his pulse. Across from him, the bear stood tall—still unrelenting, still monstrous.

The last exchange had pushed him to the edge.

His breathing was heavy, his muscles burned, and yet—**he smiled**.

Because something within him had begun to awaken.

As the dust swirled between them, Kael closed his eyes for a heartbeat. In his mind, Elise's voice rang out clearly—*“The Rowing Spear Against the Waves isn’t about force. It’s rhythm. Flow. Precision. Timing. You don’t break the tide—you ride it, redirect it, and strike from within.”*

He opened his eyes.

The bear charged again—massive legs pounding the earth like hammers.

Kael didn’t move.

He felt the timing—the pattern of the beast’s movements, the rhythm of its roars, even the heave of its breath. As the monster’s claw came down like a falling tower, Kael *stepped into the wave*.

His body twisted, not against the force—but *with it*, just off its axis.

His spear traced a spiraling line, and with practiced precision—

*Wham!*

It struck **beneath the bear’s shoulder**, a narrow seam in its armor-like flesh.

The monster reeled.

Kael didn’t pause. His body flowed like water, low to the ground, then rising again with a vertical spin. Another strike landed—just beneath the rib-like bones along its side.

**The bear snarled**, its voice low and trembling like thunder.

“I’m not the same guy from a week ago,” Kael whispered, his voice hoarse. “I’m not even the same guy from yesterday.”

He charged again.

This time, it was him pressing the attack.

He flowed like a tide—*rise, crest, crash*. The technique was no longer just a sequence of moves. It had become an instinct. His spearhead, tinged blue, **sang with energy** as it carved controlled arcs into the bear’s hide. Shallow wounds. Deep stabs. Feints. Redirects.

The bear fought back with **pure ferocity**, smashing the ground, swiping wildly, and letting out deafening roars—but Kael danced within the storm.

A paw grazed his back—he spun with the blow, rolling across the earth, and returned with a whip-fast thrust to its thigh.

*“The waves don’t stop,”* Elise had told him. *“You don’t either.”*

The bear began to back up. Kael noticed it now moved with **a limp**.

He felt something twist in his gut—an emotion rising beneath the adrenaline.

**This wasn’t just a monster.** It was a towering force of nature, yes, but also a living thing. And he’d become its greatest threat.

But there was no choice. Not now. Not with **Emily, Ethan, David, Maya**, and the others fighting for their lives. Not when **Cherry was locked in a battle so intense it made the skies hum**, her figure still unseen, her outcome still unknown.

“This battle isn’t just mine,” Kael muttered. “It’s for all of them.”

The bear let out another roar—this one filled with rage and pain. It barreled forward again, lowering its head to crush Kael beneath its bulk.

He didn’t run. He didn’t leap aside.

He *stepped in*—*again*.

The spear hummed in his hands.

*One stroke to turn the tide.*

His body moved in perfect unity—legs rotating, core twisting, arms channeling every ounce of focus into the thrust. The spear pierced forward—not with brute force, but with **timed grace**. It met the soft tissue just below the bear’s eye—**the only exposed spot near its face**.

The creature howled.

It flinched, staggering back, bleeding from a clean, shallow wound that glimmered with blue energy.

Kael hit the ground with a hard roll, skidding across the debris and coming to a stop against a stone slab. His chest rose and fell with ragged exhaustion. Blood trickled from his elbow now. His legs were shaking.

He slowly stood—bracing his weight on the spear.

The mutated bear was still standing.

Its left eye was shut from the damage. One arm hung slightly lower than the other. But it still roared, still pawed at the ground, still refused to fall.

Kael looked up at it—and smiled again.

“Damn tough beast… But I’ve still got more.”

He raised the spear again.

Around him, the battlefield raged on. He could hear the distant clashing of the **eagle troops**, still locked in their aerial dance of death. **Darius’s grunts** and precise orders echoed through the comm line. A glimpse of **Elise’s silhouette**, graceful and uninjured, gliding along the snake’s coiled form.

And still, beyond all of it, the sky trembled with Cherry’s unending duel.

Kael wiped blood from his chin and whispered:

“I won’t be left behind.”

Then he moved.

The bear lunged, still fearsome—still a beast of nightmares.

But Kael’s spear **danced**, and this time, the tide was truly on his side.

**Chapter 46 – The Beast Tide: Part 9: Cherry’s Battle**

The air felt charged as Kael continued his duel, his breath still heavy from the relentless assault of the mutated bear. But all around him, the chaos of battle raged on.

A distant roar shook the ground—a mighty, feline cry that sent a shiver down his spine. He didn’t have to look to know who that was. **Cherry** was already locked in her fight with the **mutated lion**, the monster that stood as an equal to her, and perhaps even a greater threat.

It began with a sudden shift in the ground.

The earth trembled beneath Cherry’s paws. Her **normal form**, small yet agile, had already been a force of nature. But now, there was a **shift**, a subtle but undeniable change. Her body rippled, expanding rapidly. Her fur bristled with energy, shifting from a soft, sleek coat to something more dazzling. A wave of **fiery red, orange, and yellow fur** erupted around her form, glowing with an inner heat that seemed to burn through the night air.

Her claws lengthened, becoming as sharp as obsidian, reflecting the light from the distant fires of battle. Her ears, already keen, now **grew larger**, almost bat-like in their shape—sharp tips flaring out to detect even the faintest movements. With a final burst of energy, her body grew massive, towering over the battlefield like an unstoppable force of nature.

Her eyes—deep and emerald—glowed with an inner fire as she roared to the heavens. She was in her **giant form** now, her size and strength making her an awe-inspiring presence on the battlefield.

**“Stay safe, Kael…”** Cherry’s voice whispered through their **Psionic Bond**, her thoughts intertwining with his like a delicate thread. She didn’t need words. Kael could feel her determination, her silent resolve to protect him—and the others.

The **mutated lion** charged toward her, its massive form circling like a beast of pure destruction. With fur as thick as iron and claws as long as swords, the lion’s massive body swiped with deadly intent. But Cherry was no slouch.

She moved with grace, despite her towering size. **Her massive paws struck the ground**, shaking the earth as she pivoted to dodge the lion’s initial swipe. **Her Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the brute force, the lion’s claws scraping harmlessly off her shimmering fur. She then surged forward, the ground cracking beneath her weight as she lunged at the lion.

**A sharp swipe from her claws** cut through the air with terrifying precision, drawing a deep gash along the lion’s side. The lion growled in pain, stepping back, its eyes narrowing as it assessed her. It was fast, its movements like lightning. It wasn’t a 4-star beast by any means, but it was still a beast of unimaginable power—and it was about to find out how difficult it was to match Cherry’s might.

**Cherry let out a low growl**—one that vibrated through her entire being. The lion came again, its massive paws slashing the air. But this time, **Cherry’s claws arced with energy**—a burst of compressed energy projecting from her paws like a streak of light. The **Claw Arc** exploded in the lion’s face, creating a shallow, yet impactful cut along its jaw. The lion staggered back, momentarily blinded.

**“You’re not the only one who can strike from afar.”** Cherry’s voice reverberated in Kael’s mind, a subtle but confident message. She watched the lion stagger, feeling its frustration rise. The beast snarled, blood dripping from the wound, but it was far from finished.

But then, just as Cherry prepared for another assault, the ground trembled once more—this time more violently.

**A massive figure emerged from the shadows**, smaller than the lion but still just as dangerous. A **mutated boar**, its tusks curving menacingly upward, its glowing red eyes gleaming with hatred. It had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. Now, it charged at her with ferocious speed, its body low to the ground like a bull in full charge.

Cherry's massive form reacted instinctively. **Her Psionic Bond with Kael flared**, sending a wave of **danger detection** surging through her mind. She had mere seconds to adjust.

**"Kael, I can feel it!"** she communicated to him, her thoughts sharp and full of raw emotion. **“This is getting harder!”**

But Kael couldn’t answer in that moment. The battle raged on, and he was lost in his own fight. Yet, Cherry’s strength, her **enhanced physical attributes**, and her **dynamic size shift** would be enough—if only she could handle both monsters at once.

The boar charged again, **its tusks** aimed straight at her midsection, and this time, it was faster than expected. **Cherry’s claws met the boar’s tusks**, but it was like meeting a rock head-on. The force of the collision sent a jolt of pain through her limbs. She staggered backward, her giant form momentarily off balance.

The lion took advantage of this, **charging at her side** with incredible speed. Its claws raked across her belly, drawing a deep cut.

**Cherry’s roar echoed**, a scream of pain and frustration. She had barely regained her footing when the boar rushed in again, its tusks aiming for her side. **Her fur glowed brighter**, the energy coursing through her, trying to heal the wounds, but the pressure was too much.

She dodged to the side, but the boar’s tusks caught her shoulder, tearing through her **Elemental Fur Defense** for the first time. The pain was sharp, biting—her fur unable to absorb the full force of the attack. **Cherry’s body trembled**, but her resolve didn’t waver.

She had to fight harder.

In the distance, Kael could feel the shift in the battle. His heart clenched in his chest as **Cherry’s emotions** flooded through him. **Frustration, pain, determination.**

Kael’s gaze flickered toward Cherry’s position, but he couldn’t leave his own fight. He knew what it felt like to be overwhelmed. **But Cherry was stronger than this.**

Her giant form surged forward again, this time with **claws glowing**—her **Claw Arc** slashed through the air, sending another **blast of compressed energy** toward the boar, knocking it backward. She followed up with a brutal **swipe**, her claws cutting through the boar’s hide and leaving deep gashes along its back.

But the lion wasn’t finished. It rushed in again, its jaws snapping, **its teeth gleaming** like sharp knives. Cherry barely had time to react.

Kael clenched his spear tighter. **He couldn’t help her now**, not directly. But there was something he could do.

**"Hang on, Cherry. I’m right here."**

The bond between them pulsed. It was a connection neither could fully explain, but it was enough.

**Chapter 47 – The Beast Tide: Part 10: The Final Stand Against the 3-Star Monsters**

The battle raged on, but as the sun began to rise over the horizon, the battlefield slowly shifted. The chaos of the fight against the 1- and 2-star mutated monsters had lessened as those under the command of the lower-ranked soldiers began to make their mark. The ground was littered with the remains of defeated foes, but now the real test began. The **3-star monsters** and the overwhelming presence of the **4-star lion** remained.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Snake (Elise)**

Elise had finished her battle against the **mutated snake** with ease. It had been a ferocious opponent at first—its massive, scaled body slithering quickly through the dust, striking with deadly venomous fangs. But Elise, having mastered her spear techniques, had danced around the beast with fluid grace, never allowing it to touch her.

Her spear flashed with lightning speed, each thrust calculating and precise. The snake’s massive body was large, but its mobility was hindered by the weight of its venomous fangs and the sheer size of its form. Elise’s spearwork was perfect—each attack found its mark, weakening the snake’s defenses until one final, devastating blow pierced its skull.

The snake slithered to the ground, its last breath a raspy hiss, and Elise took a breath of relief. Her eyes flickered over to Kael's ongoing battle. She smiled faintly, silently acknowledging the fierce fight he was enduring.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Panther (Darius)**

Darius’s fight with the **mutated panther** was far from over, but he was making steady progress. His prosthetic leg, while slower than the others, allowed him to keep a steady rhythm, his movements honed with precision from years of battle.

The panther had been a ferocious opponent—faster than Darius anticipated, and with razor-sharp claws that could tear through steel. But Darius had spent years dealing with far worse in his own wars. Though the panther struck him a few times, minor cuts and scratches on his arms and torso, Darius remained calm, focused, his mind sharp.

Each time the panther tried to land a fatal blow, Darius’s **strategic mind** countered it, parrying with his weapon, redirecting the creature’s power with the **momentum of his prosthetic leg**. The battle was brutal—scratches, claws, and teeth flying through the air—but Darius remained composed.

With one final sweeping move, Darius managed to pierce the panther’s throat with a well-placed strike, the blood soaking the dirt beneath them. He stood over it, victorious but not without visible wounds—scratches along his arms and a deep gash on his cheek.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Eagles (David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets)**

The battle against the **two mutated eagles** had been one of **grueling precision and sheer teamwork**. David, Ethan, Emily, and the triplets had worked together seamlessly, combining their strength, agility, and firepower to bring the mighty creatures to the ground.

The eagles were massive, their wingspans wide enough to cast shadows over the battlefield, and their talons sharp enough to pierce through steel. But the **teamwork** of these soldiers had proved to be the key to success. David’s **energy blasts** cut through the air, while Emily’s **speed** and precision kept the eagles at bay. Ethan and the triplets worked together, using their skills to ground the eagles and keep them distracted long enough for David and the others to land significant strikes.

Eventually, after a series of coordinated attacks, one of the eagles was felled. The other was not far behind, as David launched a final energy blast that hit it square in the chest. The creature collapsed to the ground with a screech, and the battle was won.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Bear (Kael)**

Kael’s fight with the **mutated bear** had not been easy. The beast, with its hulking size and monstrous strength, had continuously thrown Kael back with every swing of its massive paws. Though Kael’s **spear techniques** had been useful, the bear was simply too strong—its attacks leaving deep dents in the ground and shaking the very earth beneath Kael’s feet.

Still, Kael remained focused. He had perfected his techniques under the guidance of Elise, and now, in the midst of battle, those teachings were becoming a part of him.

The **bear’s monstrous swings** were now slower, more predictable, and Kael began to use his **agility and precision** to his advantage. Each move was calculated; he used the spear’s length to his advantage, aiming for weak spots on the bear’s body—its eyes, its exposed underbelly. The bear roared in frustration but couldn’t keep up with Kael’s swift, controlled strikes.

Though Kael had taken minor injuries—a scratch here, a bruise there—he had gained a clearer understanding of the technique Elise had taught him. The battle continued, but Kael’s confidence grew as the bear’s ferocity began to wane.

**Cherry’s Battle Against the Mutated Lion and the Boar**

Meanwhile, Cherry continued to battle the **mutated lion**, but her fight had taken a sudden turn. The lion’s ferocity matched her own, but it had been manageable until **another foe arrived**—a **mutated boar**, smaller but still a threat.

The **boar’s tusks** scraped against Cherry’s fiery fur as she twisted her body to avoid its brutal charge. Her **Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the force, but the pressure of having to fight two powerful opponents at once began to weigh on her. She moved with incredible grace, but the lion’s claws dug deep into her sides, and the boar’s tusks made their mark across her shoulder.

Cherry let out a **growl of frustration** but never hesitated. She was determined to protect the base and defeat these monsters. Her **Claw Arc** sent bursts of compressed energy flying toward the boar, knocking it off balance for a moment, allowing her to focus her attention on the lion.

The battle raged on, and the two **ferocious beasts** were relentless. But Cherry’s massive form, coupled with her raw power, was enough to hold her own.

**Darius Moves to Assist Cherry**

Darius, having completed his battle against the mutated panther, glanced over at Cherry’s position. He saw her struggling against the lion and boar, and his instincts kicked in.

**"I need to help her,"** he muttered to himself. He moved toward her, his **prosthetic leg** striking the ground with each step. His **injuries** were minor, but he could still fight. He didn’t have the speed of others, but he had the experience.

But as he neared her, he saw something unexpected—**Cherry’s eyes met his**. She gave him a look, one filled with **assurance and silent strength**. It was clear she didn’t need help—not yet, at least.

Cherry’s posture shifted. She **leapt high**, dodging a swipe from the lion and slamming down onto the boar. With one fluid motion, she used her claws to send the boar flying backward, a powerful **Claw Arc** tearing through the air.

**Darius froze.**

It was clear now. **Cherry had this.**

He took a step back, his heart swelling with pride, and moved toward the other soldiers, his battle over. **He would leave her to handle this.**

**The Aftermath**

As the battle wound down, the troops began to move toward the 2-star and 1-star battles, helping those who were still struggling. Kael, though still locked in his fight with the mutated bear, felt the pressure of the battle easing as the troops surrounding him began to gain the upper hand.

It wouldn’t be long before the base was free of these monstrous invaders. But Cherry, Darius, Elise, and the others knew they had to remain vigilant. The battle was far from over, but the tide was finally turning in their favor.

**Chapter 47 – The Beast Tide: Part 11: The Final Stand**

The battle had been long, and Kael’s body was on the edge of exhaustion. His movements had become slower, his spear strikes less fluid, but his resolve was unyielding. The **mutated bear** had been relentless, every attack a monstrous show of raw power. Its claws, massive and razor-sharp, had gouged deep into the earth around him, sending shockwaves through the ground with each of its mighty swipes.

The battle had started with Kael fighting purely defensively, dodging the bear’s tremendous swings and striking when he found an opening. But as the hours dragged on, the bear’s strength showed no signs of waning. The beast’s attacks were brutal—each one landing with a thunderous crash, pushing Kael back with every strike.

His armor was cracked, his breathing labored, and his body was bruised and battered. He could feel the weight of his spear growing heavier with every second. He staggered slightly as the bear came at him again, its claws slashing in a wild arc.

Kael’s **mind was exhausted**, but he could still hear Elise’s voice echo in his head: *"The Rowing Spear Against the Waves, Kael. Let the tide carry you."*

With his last reserves of energy, Kael took a deep breath, narrowing his focus. His body moved automatically, his spear flashing with deadly precision as he parried the bear’s incoming strike, using its own momentum against it.

The bear recoiled, and Kael saw his opening. With a quick, sharp motion, Kael drove the spear deep into the bear’s side. The beast let out a deafening roar, staggering back, blood streaming from the wound. Kael pressed forward, his body screaming in protest, but he wouldn’t stop now. With one final effort, Kael thrust the spear into the bear’s chest, piercing its heart.

The bear’s body trembled as it let out a final, guttural growl, then collapsed onto the ground with a heavy thud. Kael fell to his knees, breath ragged, as he watched the life leave the beast’s eyes. He had done it. The fight was over—**but only for him**.

**Elsewhere on the Battlefield**

Though Kael had triumphed, the battle was far from finished. The troops, led by their commanders, continued their battle against the remaining **1-star** and **2-star** monsters.

**David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets** were still deep in the fray, battling the **2-star monsters**. The air was thick with smoke and dust, but their focus was unwavering.

David stood at the front, his **energy blaster** raised, firing precise blasts at the advancing monsters. The **energy blast** cut through the air like a beam of light, striking monsters down with deadly accuracy. David’s **tactical mind** allowed him to predict their movements, always staying one step ahead.

Ethan and the triplets fought side by side, using their **enhanced physical abilities** to devastating effect. Ethan’s speed was a blur as he dodged attacks and closed in on the monsters, while the triplets worked in perfect synchronization, attacking from multiple angles and using their combined strength to bring down the enemies. Their teamwork was seamless, each member knowing exactly what the other would do before they did it.

Emily, ever the agile fighter, used her **swift movements** to dodge the monsters' attacks, striking when they were least expecting it. She had learned to **capitalize on the weaknesses of her enemies**, focusing on the joints and eyes to disable the 2-star monsters.

Together, the team was a well-oiled machine, and within moments, the last of the 2-star monsters was defeated. Their victory was hard-earned, but they were victorious.

**The 1-Star Battles**

The **1-star monsters** were easier to handle for the rest of the troops, but that did not mean they were any less dangerous. Soldiers worked together in squads, each focusing on their assigned enemies. **Energy weapons**, **swords**, and **bombs** were deployed in synchronized attacks, ensuring that the 1-star monsters were overwhelmed quickly.

**Energy blasts** shot from the rifles of soldiers, striking monsters at range, while others moved in close, using their **combat knives** and **swords** to finish the job. The monsters, though strong in their own right, were simply no match for the superior tactics and firepower of the troops. They were cut down swiftly, their roars of rage silenced by the precise, well-placed attacks.

One soldier, a young recruit, barely managed to avoid being crushed by the foot of a 1-star monster, but a fellow soldier leaped in just in time, knocking the recruit to safety. The squad worked quickly, finishing off the last of the 1-star monsters, their attacks coordinated and deadly.

**Cherry’s Battle Against the Mutated Lion and Boar**

Meanwhile, in the distance, **Cherry’s battle** raged on. She had transformed into her **giant form**, her fur glowing a dazzling mixture of **red, orange, and yellow**, rippling with power. Her claws were sharp as ever, her ears pinned back as she confronted the **mutated lion** and the newly arrived **mutated boar**.

The **lion** roared, its massive frame almost as large as Cherry’s own, and the **boar** charged with its tusks bared. Cherry swiped with her claws, creating arcs of compressed energy that sent the lion tumbling backward. Her **Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the lion’s strikes, though it still managed to get in a few glancing blows.

But the boar was faster than the lion. Its tusks **grazed Cherry’s side**, and the pain was enough to cause her to stumble. She turned just in time to see the boar charging again, and with a growl, she launched herself at it, using her **massive form** to slam into it with **incredible force**. The boar was sent sprawling, its tusks still scraping against her fur, but Cherry was too strong.

Her **Claw Arc** cut through the air, striking the boar in the side. The creature yelped in pain but continued to struggle, and Cherry knew she needed to finish this fight. She squared off with the lion first, her body glowing as she prepared her next move.

**The Troops Support the 1-Star and 2-Star Battles**

As the final 2-star monsters fell, the **troops** quickly began moving toward the 1-star battlefront. They lent their support to the soldiers still fighting, helping them finish off the remaining monsters. **Kael’s team** was especially active, as they used their **energy weapons** and **sword techniques** to aid in dispatching the last few monsters.

They acted swiftly and efficiently, each soldier moving with purpose as they continued to clear the area. The **energy blasts** from David’s rifle hit their marks with deadly precision, and Ethan, Emily, and the triplets continued to work together, dispatching the smaller monsters with ease.

As the final blow landed on the last of the 1-star beasts, a cheer went up from the troops. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. The area was cleared, and the troops turned to look at the ongoing battle between **Cherry** and the remaining 4-star monsters.

**Chapter 48 – The Beast Tide: Part 12: Cherry's Triumph**

The ground trembled under the weight of three monsters—**Cherry**, radiant in her massive battle form, squared off against the **mutated lion** and **boar**, both nearly equal in ferocity but lacking her unique power. Her vibrant fur glowed in hues of **sunset flame**—**red**, **orange**, and **yellow**, crackling with elemental energy. Her deep, golden eyes narrowed as her claws dug into the earth, calculating the next move.

The **lion** lunged, muscles rippling, its fangs gleaming with bloodlust. Cherry sidestepped with incredible agility for her size, her **claws arcing** through the air in a burst of **compressed energy**. The strike hit the lion square across its snout, leaving a glowing cut. The beast roared, stumbling back, while the **boar charged** from behind with brute speed, tusks flashing.

Cherry twisted mid-motion, her body shifting as her **fur hardened**, absorbing most of the impact. But the boar’s strike was strong—it sent her skidding across the broken earth, her massive paws digging trenches as she came to a halt.

For the first time in the fight, **pain flickered** across Cherry’s expression. Blood stained her golden coat where the boar’s tusk had pierced through. Her ears twitched. *Kael…* She didn’t need to see him to feel him. Through their **Psionic Bond**, she felt his exhaustion, his pulse still rapid from his own battle. She could sense the others moving, regrouping, watching her from afar—but not interfering. Not yet.

Her sharp ears perked up.

**Boom!**

An explosion rocked the field. A shell had landed near the boar, just a few meters short of impact, sending it reeling to the side. Cherry’s head turned to the ridge.

Kael stood there, supporting himself on his spear. Beside him, **Darius**, **David**, and **Ethan** manned a mobile artillery unit the soldiers had pulled into position. **Emily**, still catching her breath, pointed out coordinates, her young face marked with sweat and resolve.

They weren’t here to steal her battle.

They were here to **support her**.

As the lion came at her again, Cherry **ducked low**, rolled beneath its lunge, then sprang upward with feral grace. Her **claws slashed upward**, raking through the lion’s throat in a streak of burning energy. It roared, blood gushing from the wound, but Cherry wasn’t done. Her **Claw Arc** surged from both front paws in a crisscross, slicing through the lion’s chest. The beast staggered back, weakened, dazed.

The boar tried to capitalize, ramming into her from the side. This time, the impact sent Cherry flying—but she **twisted midair**, landing heavily but on all fours. Blood dripped from her side, and her breathing came in ragged huffs.

Another shell exploded, this time grazing the boar’s flank. It squealed, its armored hide dented and scorched. The troops were firing carefully—**supporting** without overwhelming, leaving the final blows to Cherry.

Cherry roared—a sound not of pain, but of **rising fury**.

With a powerful leap, she launched herself at the **injured lion**, dodging its sluggish swipe and driving her claws deep into its ribs. Her body surged with power, fur flaring, muscles flexing. With one final roar, she **slammed the lion into the ground**, her claws erupting with a **double Claw Arc** that tore through its skull.

The mutated lion went limp. **One down.**

She turned immediately—**no pause**, no triumph—as the boar came again.

Cherry met it head-on.

The two collided in a brutal clash, tusks grinding against claws. The boar tried to gore her again, but Cherry ducked low, her muscles rippling as she twisted beneath its bulk. She **latched on with her rear claws**, anchoring herself, then began slashing with relentless precision. Each strike chipped away at its armor, one after another, wearing it down.

The boar tried to buck her off—but she held tight.

And then Kael’s voice—barely above a whisper—slipped through their bond:  
*“Now, Cherry.”*

She **closed her eyes**, channeling every bit of her remaining energy.

Her claws glowed **red-hot**, and with a final, furious scream, she unleashed a **full-powered Claw Arc**, both front paws **cleaving into the boar’s neck**.

The light from the attack was blinding.

When the dust cleared, the mutated boar slumped to the ground—twitching, shuddering—then lay still.

Cherry stood in silence, blood on her fur, **heaving**. Her massive form flickered, then slowly began to **shrink**, returning to her normal, sleek size. Her fur was matted with blood, and she had several gashes along her flank, but she stood tall—head high, eyes proud.

Kael reached her first, limping slightly, but his smile was soft. “You did it,” he murmured, reaching out to her gently. Cherry leaned into his touch, closing her eyes, the bond between them thrumming with mutual pride and exhaustion.

Darius, David, Emily, Ethan, and the rest of the troops gathered slowly, their weapons lowered, their faces tired—but triumphant. Around them, the battlefield was quiet. The sky was painted orange and gold as the sun dipped low on the horizon, reflecting the fading embers of battle.

The **Beast Tide** was over.

The monsters had been repelled.

And though blood had been shed, they were still standing.

**Chapter 48 – The Final Echo of Battle**

The sun, now a golden disc on the horizon, cast its last warm glow over the battlefield. The once howling winds of war had gone still. The air was heavy with the scent of ash, blood, and earth—but also the quiet, humming relief of survival.

The last monster had fallen.  
The **Beast Tide** was over.

A silence held for a moment longer, suspended in awe… until it broke—first as a whisper, then a rising roar.

**Cheers erupted.**

"WE DID IT!"  
"We're alive!"  
"THE BASE STANDS!"

Weapons raised high, bloodied and battered soldiers—veterans and green recruits alike—embraced one another. Some wept, some laughed. Some simply collapsed where they stood, the adrenaline leaving their bodies all at once. Dozens of soldiers and defense operators moved forward in organized rows to begin collecting **monster corpses**—large and small—dragging them or loading them onto heavy transports. Harvest teams set up markers, readying for extraction and research.

Kael stood beside Cherry, still scratched and bruised but upright, watching it all.

**Elise approached**, her expression calm, but her pace steady. The violet accents in her armor glimmered faintly with dust. Her black hair was tied up, some strands loose from combat. Her spear was holstered on her back.

"Kael." Her voice held its usual grace, but there was something warmer now. “You’ve improved.”

Kael turned to her, the dirt and sweat still clinging to his brow. “Thanks. I used your technique—the *Rowing Spear Against the Waves*.”

“I saw,” she said with a nod, a flicker of pride in her violet eyes. “You didn’t just mimic it. You molded it. It was yours.”

Kael let out a slow exhale. “It felt different. Like I finally understood what you meant about *feeling the rhythm of the enemy*. Not just striking—*responding.*”

She smiled faintly. “Exactly. It’s not about strength alone. It’s about flow. Understanding. Timing.” She tilted her head. “And Cherry?”

Kael glanced down at Cherry, who was licking at a healing wound on her foreleg. She looked up at him, ears flicking, golden eyes tired but content.

“She saved everyone today,” he said, crouching down beside her. He ran a hand gently along her singed but glowing fur. “You were incredible.”

Cherry let out a soft *chuff*, leaning into him, and through their **psionic bond**, Kael could feel the pulse of her pride, pain, and reassurance.  
She was telling him—*I’m okay. You don’t need to worry.*

“I am proud of you,” he whispered.

Around them, the soldiers had begun piling the bodies of the monsters. Even the massive corpses of the 3- and 4-star beasts were being chained and loaded into carrier pods. Some younger cadets stared in awe at Cherry as she walked past in her smaller form, still radiant despite her wounds.

Then, from atop a transport truck, **Commander Darius** climbed up. His coat was torn at the sleeve, and a bandage wrapped his shoulder. His **prosthetic leg** clicked slightly as he stood tall, surveying his troops. The noise quieted as people turned toward him.

He raised his hand and spoke, voice booming.

“We have endured the storm. We stood against the dark, the teeth, the claws. And we held.”

“Some of us fell. But because of their sacrifice, and your bravery, this base still stands. Our people are safe.”

“The monsters came to break us—but we proved we will not bend.”

“Today is not just survival. It is a reminder that unity, discipline, and courage... will always prevail.”

“You all fought as one. **Soldiers. Scouts. Specialists. Tamers. Children. Survivors.** You are all warriors now.”

The crowd burst into applause. Many saluted. Some pounded their chests.

“LONG LIVE THE BASE!” someone shouted.

“LONG LIVE OUR PEOPLE!” another cried.

The cheers spread like wildfire.

Near the makeshift medical bay, **Emily** sat on the edge of a cot, drinking water while a medic tended to a bruise on her cheek. **Ethan** flopped next to her, shirt ripped, grinning ear to ear.

“I punched a 2-star in the face,” Ethan said proudly.

David rolled his eyes. “That wasn’t its face. That was its *butt.* It ran away because it was confused.”

“Still counts,” Ethan said, smug.

Emily laughed tiredly. “I’m just glad we’re not dead.”

Elsewhere, **the Triplets**—Cora, Lian, and Vale—were grouped together, watching the cleanup efforts while munching on ration bars.

“We worked surprisingly well together,” Cora muttered.

Lian nodded. “Still think we could’ve taken on a 3-star if they hadn’t pulled us back.”

“Shut up,” Vale said with a grin. “You almost tripped on your own blade.”

Back by the walls, Kael stood alongside Darius again, both looking out over the land now strewn with blood and fading smoke.

“Cherry really is something,” Darius said quietly.

“She’s more than that,” Kael replied. “She’s family.”

Darius looked at him for a long moment, then offered a quiet nod.

“You’ve grown, Kael. In more ways than one.”

The commander turned to address some officers, leaving Kael standing alone as the sky darkened into a velvet blue.

He looked over the field. Bodies of monsters lay quiet. The sound of chains, tools, commands, and occasional laughter filled the air.

**It was over.**

But as Kael stood there, Cherry curled by his side, a strange feeling fluttered in his chest.

Relief.

Pride.

But also… anticipation.

This wasn’t the end.

This was the beginning of what came next.

**Chapter 49 – The Feast After the Storm**

The fires flickered quietly through the night, dotting the camp like glowing embers scattered across a blackened battlefield. Tents had been erected where they could; some slept beneath the open sky, too exhausted to care. The wounded were bandaged, the medics rotated in shifts, and a low hum of silence stretched through the base like a warm blanket—comforting, healing.

Kael lay on his back beside Cherry, whose head rested gently on his chest in her smaller form. He could still feel the faint echo of her pain through their **psionic bond**, but her body was healing rapidly. Her breathing was soft and steady.

The stars above were unusually clear. For once, they weren’t drowned out by roaring winds or flaming skies.  
Tonight, they could rest.

**Morning.**

The scent of dew clung to the air as the base stirred awake. Soldiers emerged, stiff and sore, from bunks and tents. Despite bruises and scrapes, they moved with a shared spirit—a weight had been lifted. The world felt... a little lighter.

Then, the horn blew once. A signal.

Everyone gathered at the main plaza, near the command tower. The entire base—every survivor, every defender, every soul—stood together. The stage was simple. No grand flags. No ornate banners. Just **Commander Darius**, standing tall with a file in hand and silence in his eyes.

Kael stood beside Elise and Cherry, near the front, Ethan and David just behind him. The wind was still. Every breath hung heavy in anticipation.

Darius began to speak.

“Yesterday, we stood on the edge of ruin. Monsters poured through the wilds—three-stars, four-stars, beasts we once thought myth.”  
“And yet… we stood firm.”  
“We fought. Together.”  
“And we won.”

Murmurs, nods. Some held back tears.

“But victory has its price.”

Darius lifted the file.

“Fifty-three names. Fifty-three warriors who gave their lives so we could stand here today.”

He looked down at the first name.

“Captain Marren Dall, who held the eastern line when it began to fall.”  
“Scout Alina Vorne, who dragged four wounded cadets out of the fire and didn’t make it back.”  
“Private Jae-Rin Tae, the youngest among us, only sixteen.”

A hush fell. Some sniffled. Others bowed their heads.

Darius continued reading a few more names, voice thick but steady—then stopped and gently closed the file.

“There are more. Too many to read in one breath. But they will be remembered. Engraved on the Memorial Stone that will rise tomorrow.”  
“Their names will not vanish. Their sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

He straightened and looked across the crowd.

“And now… we honor them the only way they would have wanted—**by living, growing, and fighting on.**”  
“The beasts fell. Their flesh, while dangerous, is powerful. **You all know what it means.**”  
“Eat. Rebuild. Grow stronger. So the next time the wilds rise—we’ll crush them without losing another soul.”

A moment of silence followed. Then a horn sounded twice.

**Feast time.**

Long steel tables were set. Fire pits blazed as slabs of monster meat—some still sparking with faint energy—were roasted, seared, and stewed. Teams of cooks and engineers worked together, mixing herbs, nutrients, and mana-cleansing salts to make the flesh not only safe—but power-enhancing.

The scent was intoxicating. Smoky. Spicy. Foreign.  
**Mutated boar ribs**.  
**Roasted 2-star wyvern tail.**  
**Shredded lion flank with jungle salt.**

Every bite made their bodies *hum* with power.

Kael tore into a portion of bear meat. His muscles burned with the sensation, not painful—**revitalizing**. Every chew sent a pulse through his limbs. Cherry devoured three entire plates before curling up again, her ears twitching.

Laughter rang through the air. Bottles clinked. Soldiers joked, play-fought, and told battle stories with the energy of children let loose from storm bunkers.

“Did you see me stab that mantis in the eye?” David was bragging at a table nearby. “It shrieked like a banshee!”

“It shrieked because you tripped and landed on its face,” Ethan said with a snort.

“Hey, whatever works!”

Elise walked over, plate in hand. She sat beside Kael under one of the tents lit by soft orange light.

“You holding up?” she asked, starting on a roasted fangfish skewer.

Kael nodded, wiping sweat and soot from his brow. “I’m… more than okay. I’ve never felt this alive. My body feels like it’s pulsing with heat.”

“That’s the beast energy,” she replied. “The stronger the beast, the greater the surge. You were lucky not to take more of the bear’s hits.”

Kael looked at her. “Thanks, Elise. For the technique. For everything.”

She paused. “I taught you the form, Kael. *You* turned it into something dangerous.”

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I still feel like I’m chasing you.”

Elise chuckled softly. “You should be. I’m not slowing down anytime soon.”

He grinned. “Neither am I.”

Their eyes met for a long moment. Quiet, but not awkward. Comfortable.

Then Elise leaned back on her hands. “Cherry really evolved, didn’t she?”

Kael nodded. “She’s incredible. I couldn’t have done half of what I did without knowing she was out there fighting too.”

Cherry, hearing her name, stretched lazily and gave a low purring *gruff*. Elise smirked.

“She might be stronger than both of us soon.”

“She already is,” Kael said proudly.

Later that night, music began to play—someone had pulled out a harmonica, and soon makeshift drums from canisters added rhythm. Dances broke out, clumsy but joyful. Troops clapped and spun each other around. Even some medics joined in.

Darius sat nearby, his prosthetic leg propped on a crate, sharing a drink with the elder soldier Victor and nodding along to the beat.

“I remember a time when we didn’t dance after battles,” Victor said.

“We didn’t win those,” Darius replied with a small smile. “This one… we earned it.”

As the night deepened, Kael stood again, looking out from a quiet perch on the wall. The stars stretched far and endless above him.

Cherry pressed against his side.

Elise joined him again, arms crossed. “Thinking about what’s next?”

Kael nodded. “This battle… was only a warning, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. But now we know what we’re capable of. So we train harder. We prepare better.”  
Her eyes glinted. “And we evolve.”

Kael looked down at the camp—at Emily teaching a younger cadet how to clean a blade, the triplets laughing by the fire, Darius giving a toast, Ethan trying to flirt with a medic and failing miserably.

And he smiled.

“I’m ready,” he said.

**Chapter 50 – The Path to the Mountains**

The sky was still painted in twilight when Kael awoke.

The camp lay in calm silence, dew clinging to the grass, and soft breaths rose from tents and resting soldiers. But Kael had long returned to his old rhythm—**waking before the sun, training with purpose**.

He stepped into the empty training ground, spear in hand, shirt off, breath misting in the cold morning air.

Each swing, each thrust, was like a mantra. His muscles sang from the previous battle, but he pushed through, channeling his thoughts into the motion of the weapon.

**Thrust. Sweep. Spin. Lunge.**

It wasn’t just training anymore. It was **refinement**, carving the blade of his spirit sharper with every movement.

Cherry watched quietly from the nearby wall in her humanoid form, her golden eyes glowing faintly.

Kael paused after an hour, sweat dripping from his brow, and sat beside her. He didn't speak aloud—he didn't need to.

Their bond was deeper now.

**Kael (mentally):** "Cherry… I’m strong. But not strong enough. Not yet."  
**Cherry:** *tilts her head, ears twitching slightly*  
**Kael:** "We faced 4-star beasts… but the world has worse. Ancient beings. Ones that could erase cities. And I could barely hold my own against the bear."  
**Cherry (softly):** *You won. And you lived.*  
**Kael:** "Only because I had all of you. But what if next time I’m alone?"

She was silent. Not because she disagreed—but because she understood.

**Kael:** "That’s why I’ve decided. I’m going into the wild. Alone. The Eastern Mountains. There are things there that can push me to the edge."  
**Cherry (after a pause):** *…It will be dangerous.*  
**Kael:** "I know. But necessary."

Later that morning, he found Elise training cadets near the armory yard. Her presence, as always, was poised, confident, sharp as a blade’s edge.

She noticed him and called a break, walking over with a flask in hand.

"Morning ritual, huh?" she asked, raising a brow.

Kael smirked, brushing his damp hair back. “Old habits die hard.”

She leaned against the fence post, her gaze sweeping over the camp. “You’re restless.”

Kael didn’t deny it. “I need to grow more. I’m heading into the wild. Alone.”

Elise didn’t speak immediately. She studied him instead. The boy she had once helped train. The one who was now a man—not just in strength, but in resolve.

“You’re still five years younger than me,” she murmured, a faint smile touching her lips, “and already stronger than most elite squads.”

“Not stronger than you,” he replied.

She scoffed. “Yet.”

A silence hung between them—familiar, respectful.

“Promise me one thing,” Elise said, her voice softer now. “Don’t die out there. Not before I get to spar you at your best.”

Kael nodded. “I will come back stronger. I promise.”

By afternoon, Kael informed Darius and the others. They gathered in the strategy tent.

Darius listened in silence. Then gave a long, measured nod.

“You’ve earned the right to choose your path,” he said. “But be smart. Wild training is not the same as battle. It’s solitude. And it can break you.”

“I know,” Kael replied, steady. “But I’m ready.”

Darius stepped forward and clasped Kael’s arm. “Then return not just stronger—but **wiser**.”

**That night**, the base lit up for one more feast—**Kael’s farewell**.

This time, it wasn’t about victory. It was about honoring a friend. A comrade. A brother-in-arms.

Kael sat surrounded by laughter and stories. David and Ethan made fun of his serious face. Emily gave him a hand-drawn “training talisman” that he promised to keep. The Triplets cried and hugged him like he was going to war.

Cherry sat beside him, devouring yet another roast.

The air was full of warmth. Of memories.

**Dawn.**

Kael stood at the gate, gear packed, spear strapped to his back. The forest ahead whispered like a beast in slumber.

As he was about to leave, a figure approached.

**Elise.**

She walked up to him without a word at first, eyes steady. Then she held out a small cloth pouch.

“What’s this?” Kael asked.

“Mana stabilizer pills. For when your energy gets wild out there.”

He took them, then looked at her again.

“Elise…”

“Don’t get sentimental,” she said, though her voice was gentler than usual. “Just one last thing.”

She leaned in slightly.

“When you're strong enough… head to the capital. Ask for the **Dran family**. They owe me a favor—and you might find answers there. About the ancients. About yourself.”

Kael’s expression sharpened. “Dran family. Got it.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Go. Train hard. Come back a force the world can’t ignore.”

He smiled, sharp and confident. “I will.”

With a final wave, Kael turned and walked through the gate, Cherry beside him. The trees parted slowly as they entered the forest path, and in the distance, the **Eastern Mountains** loomed like giants against the morning sky.

Every step forward echoed with the promise of trials.

**But Kael didn’t fear them. He welcomed them.**

**nd of Chapter 50**  
**End of Arc I – The Dawn Before Evolution**

**Here is the post-battle physical and ability growth report** for Kael and his allies after the large-scale battle. Every survivor has shown at least **+0.5 Star Power** increase, with standout individuals gaining additional boosts based on performance, exposure, and mental strain resilience.

**🌟 Updated Star Power & Ability Growth Report**

| **Name** | **Post-Battle Star Power** | **Specialty Focus (Growth Highlights)** | **Ability Growth / Notes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | **3.5** *(+0.6)* | Still balanced, but with refined **spear mastery**, **heightened reflexes**, and **mental clarity** under pressure. | - Spear Technique: Advanced Mid-Level - Focus Control Improved (near instinctual reaction) - Stamina/Endurance gains noticeable. |
| **Cherry** | **5.1** *(+0.6)* | Dynamic combat monster; maintains elite physical advantage. Survived two 4-star beasts alone. | - **Claw Arc Lv. 2** *(Now deeper impact & 15m range)* - **Psionic Bond (Stage 2 unlocked)** – Kael-Cherry emotional clarity now precise, pre-emptive danger signaling improved. - Elemental Fur: High resistance now includes **minor heat redirection** |
| **Darius** | **3.7** *(+0.2)* | Remains elite but aging slightly slows his rate. Tactical command sharpened, aura more oppressive. | - **Commander’s Focus** now visibly boosts morale and coordination in nearby troops. - Combat strength retains efficiency, but durability lower in longer fights. |
| **Elise Dran** | **~4.0** *(+0.2)* | Master-class spear wielder. Technical growth still possible but near human peak. | - Spear Art: **Dran Flow Step** enhanced (she now moves like water between gaps in enemy lines). - Magic pressure noticeably heavier. |
| **Victor** | **2.8** *(+0.5)* | Tank. Massive defensive fortitude growth. Survived 1-on-1 with a 3-star beast. | - Muscular Density increased. - **Shock Absorption** trait emerged (dampens impact-based attacks slightly). |
| **Maya** | **2.8** *(+0.5)* | Evasion queen. Was untouchable in several skirmishes. | - Speed pushed to near superhuman burst sprint. - Reflex dodge enhancement (subconscious body twitching now activates in crisis). |
| **Garret** | **3.0** *(+0.5)* | Tech-Axe destructive power now matches short-burst artillery. | - Artillery Control optimized. - New **Stun Field Pulse** added to axe (short range, high crowd disruption). |
| **Marcus** | **3.0** *(+0.5)* | Rocket Hammer nearly uncontrollable at max power now. Pure brute growth. | - Hammer swing creates **ground fracture shock** (if stomped with enough power). - Minor growth in aim coordination. |

**🧠 Lower Rank Fighters (Major Growth Observed)**

| **Name** | **Post-Battle Star Power** | **Growth Summary** | **Ability Improvement** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **David** | **2.2** *(+0.5)* | Improved coordination with Kael’s team. Better bone weapon synergy. | Gun + melee integration mastered. Critical hits on mutated wolves. |
| **Ethan** | **2.2** *(+0.5)* | Survival and anti-beast tactics now deeply ingrained. | Reaction time now superhuman under pressure. Field medicine skills also improved. |
| **Emily** | **1.8** *(+0.5)* | Massive growth in intuition. Anticipates enemy paths. | **Danger Sense radius** extended to **700m**. Initiated small rescue ops mid-battle. |
| **The Triplets** | **2.2** *(+0.5 each)* | Unison sword-shield formation now covers a wider angle. | Can now hold formation even while fatigued. Shield Bash velocity increased. Coordination sync <1 second lag. |

**💬 Summary Notes**

* **Kael** stands at the edge of true 4-star potential. His reaction times, stamina, and combat perception make him one of the most efficient mid-tier elites in the region.
* **Cherry**, now firmly in 5-star category, is no longer just a companion but an apex battlefield force.
* **Elise and Darius**, while not gaining as much raw stat growth, had their **skill precision, aura influence, and leadership** scale meaningfully.
* The **1–2 star fighters** matured **dramatically**, with several now capable of managing threats they would've died to days before.

**Chapter 50.5 – The Shifting Balance**

The world had changed. The battle Kael and his allies had just endured was only a ripple—one of many forming in the tides of something much greater.

As the ashes of war settled and the survivors healed their wounds, beyond the walls of the base, across ravaged plains and shadowed forests, something else stirred.

Not just humans were growing stronger. The beasts were changing too.

Once primal and chaotic, the **mutated animals**—from bears to serpents, eagles to tigers—were beginning to **evolve**. Their mutations weren’t just savage aberrations anymore. Their bodies were refining. Their instincts, sharpening. **Some were beginning to regain a forgotten intellect**, echoes of ancient bloodlines and ancestral instincts whispering back to life.

And then there were the **Ancient Beasts**.

They were never meant to awaken fully. Locked in slumber or madness, their strength eclipsed even humanity’s greatest weapons. But the touch of war, the scent of core bloodshed, and mankind’s reach into forbidden zones had stirred them awake.

**🔥 The Three Paths of the Ancient Beasts:**

1. **The Cognizant**:  
   A small number among the ancient monsters regained clarity. With that clarity came purpose, pride, and boundaries. They reclaimed their **domains**—vast forested mountains, deep lakes, or ancient ruins—and imposed **order**. They no longer rampaged aimlessly. But they **tolerated no human intrusion**.
2. **The Tyrants**:  
   Others chose **domination**. These beasts expanded violently, crushing all resistance, laying waste to towns and fortified bases. Their minds retained strategy, and their hatred for humans never dulled. They now command mutated armies.
3. **The Lost**:  
   Many still wandered in madness—destroying indiscriminately. These were the most dangerous. No warning. No reasoning. Just death.

And amidst this chaotic ecosystem, humanity’s only hope lay in **matching** this escalation.

**🛡️ Weapon Technique Mastery System (New Global Classification)**

All combatants now recognized that **raw power wasn't enough**. Technique mastery was everything.

| **Mastery Level** | **Description** |
| --- | --- |
| **Lv 1 - Basic** | Fundamental control, basic use of weapon form. |
| **Lv 2 - Intermediate** | Reliable efficiency, few advanced moves. |
| **Lv 3 - Advanced** | Creative combat use, strategic understanding. |
| **Lv 4 - Mastery** | Almost complete control; personalized style. |
| **Lv 5+ Aura Path** | Requires consumption of **10-Star monster core and heart**. Grants energy projection and aura traits. |

*No one on Earth has reached Aura Level mastery yet. It is said only those who’ve faced ancient beasts and survived with their cores intact may begin the aura path.*

**⚔️ Weapon Grades (Crafting Materials)**

The forging of weapons has evolved with the rise of beasts. Human weapons no longer suffice.

| **Grade** | **Material** |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Crude human or beast bone weapons |
| 2 | 5-Star core + 5-Star monster bone |
| 3 | 10-Star core + 10-Star monster bone |
| 4 | 20-Star core + 20-Star monster bone |
| 5 | 40-Star core + 40-Star monster bone |
| 6 | 60-Star core + soul + monster bone |
| 7 | 80-Star core + soul + monster bone |
| 8 | 100-Star **Ancient** core + soul + bone |
| 9 | 150-Star **Ancient** core + soul + rare enhancement |
| 10 | ??? (Unknown. Possibly divine or forbidden material) |

**🌈 Special Abilities and Awakening Potential**

As humans near **10-Star**, their body may naturally awaken **special abilities**.

| **Ability Level** | **Range: Lv 1 to Lv 10** |
| --- | --- |
| **Grades**: | **White**, Grey, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet, Red, Gold, **Rainbow** (Max) |

* Some awaken multiple abilities.
* Some awaken before reaching 10-star.
* Some **never awaken**.
* **Every ability's grade and level are determined by fate**, lineage, and unknown variables.

**Cherry's Abilities:**

* **Claw Arc** → *White Grade*, Lv 2
* **Psionic Bond** → *Blue Grade*, Stage 2

**🍖 Beast Meat & Growth Limits**

Human growth now depends on **star-tier compatibility**.

* A **3-Star warrior** will only benefit from eating **3-Star beast meat or above**.
* **Lower meat offers no gains** after reaching new star thresholds.
* **Younger people** absorb energy faster; **older people slow down** after 2.5 stars unless specialized training or resources are used.

**⚠️ Final Insight**

As Kael left for the wild in search of strength, he wasn't just walking into forested mountains.

He was stepping into **a world changing faster than ever**, where power came not only from training, but **understanding the evolution of the enemy**, the **forge of blood**, and the **laws of primal energy** awakening all around them.

The era of random survival had ended.

The era of **Ascension through Systemized Evolution** had begun.

**📘 Character Growth Tracker (Post Arc 1 – After Chapter 50)**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Weapon Mastery** | **Aura Level** | **Special Ability (Grade + Level)** | **Signature Weapon (Grade)** | **Notes / Milestones** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | 3.5 | Intermediate (Lv 2) → Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Bone Spear (Grade 1) | Plans to train solo in wild; fast growth |
| **Cherry** | 5.1 | Mastery (Lv 4) | – | Psionic Bond (Blue, Lv 3) Claw Arc (White, Lv 4) | Claws (Natural – Grade 3 equivalent) | Defeated two 4★ monsters solo with support |
| **Elise** | ??? (>4.0) | Advanced → Borderline Mastery | – | Not Revealed | Spear (Unknown Grade, likely 2–3) | Origin hidden; close bond with Kael |
| **Darius** | 3.7 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Hammer-Spear (Grade 1) | Commander; strong aura presence |
| **Victor** | 2.8 | Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | Not Awakened | Shield (Grade 1) | Heavy defense; tank role |
| **Maya** | 2.8 | Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | Not Awakened | Dual Daggers (Grade 1) | Stealth, speed, evasive mastery |
| **Garret** | 3.0 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Tech-Axe (Modified Grade 2) | Mechanic combat style |
| **Marcus** | 3.0 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Rocket Hammer (Grade 2) | Brutal melee specialist |
| **David** | 2.2 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Not Awakened | Rifle + Bone Dagger (Grade 1) | Tactical, balanced fighter |
| **Ethan** | 2.2 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Not Awakened | Hybrid Tech Knife (Grade 1) | Reflex + survival expert |
| **Emily** | 1.8 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Danger Sense (Green, Lv 2) | Support tool (Grade 0) | Recon + early warning system |
| **Triplets** | 2.2 each | Basic (Lv 1) → Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | None Yet | Twin Sword + Shield (Grade 1) | Sync tactics improving with group battles |

**🔮 Future-Ready Additions:**

For upcoming arcs, you can track:

* 📈 **Beast core consumption** (who ate what tier)
* 🧠 **Ability Awakening Timeline**
* ⚙️ **Weapon Upgrade Logs**
* 🏅 **Notable Battles / Events**

**Chapter 51 – Into the Eastern Wilds**  
**Arc 2 Begins**

The sun rose over the horizon in quiet shades of gold, lighting the long path eastward that stretched ahead of Kael and Cherry. The forest had thinned out gradually over the ten days of travel, giving way to harder soil, rising slopes, and jagged stone ridges that hinted at the vast mountain range looming in the distance.

Each day was a trial — not only of endurance but of skill, judgment, and growth.

**Battle 1: Scaled Panther Ambush (3.5★ Monster)**

It came during dusk on the sixth day. The forest shadows had stretched long, and Kael was gathering dry wood while Cherry scanned the treetops in silence.

Suddenly, a black blur burst through the dense foliage — a **panther**, but not ordinary. Its sleek body shimmered faintly in the dying light, covered with **obsidian-like scales** that reflected like armor. Its claws, twice as long as normal, shimmered with a strange metallic edge. A deep **snarl vibrated the air**, sending a chill into Kael’s spine.

**Mutated Scaled Panther (3.5★)**

* **Defense**: Natural Armor (pseudo Grade 2 toughness)
* **Speed**: Extreme burst movement
* **Threat**: Ambush predator, known for targeting weaknesses

Kael spun his spear with practiced ease, his weapon still a **Grade 1 bone-spear**, upgraded only slightly with eagle-bone edge reinforcement. His **Weapon Mastery Lv 2 – Intermediate** kicked in: quick thrusts, calculated spacing, mobility.

But the panther was too fast. It lunged, aiming for his throat.

Cherry, a blur of crimson, intercepted mid-air with a **psionic push** — her ability flaring to **Blue Grade Lv 2**, creating a temporary ripple around her. The panther twisted mid-flight and crashed against a tree but bounced up almost immediately.

Kael focused, channeling his energy into a defensive thrust — not aura, but **perfect timing**.  
He drove the spear into the beast’s flank, breaking past its scale with a precision strike using his weapon skill — **Piercing Point: Twist Thrust** (Intermediate Spear Technique Lv 2 – specialized form).

The beast hissed, staggered.

Cherry followed it up:  
Her claws shimmered faintly as she activated her second ability — **Claw Arc (White Grade Lv 2)**.  
In one smooth arc, she slashed through the beast’s side, sending black blood spraying as the **armored hide split**. The beast yowled, tried to flee — but Cherry leapt, slammed it to the ground, and **dug her claws in deep**, ending the threat.

“You're slower than before,” she teased, wiping the blood from her fur.

Kael chuckled, panting. “Or they’re just getting faster.”

**Battle 2: Sky Serpent of the Ridge (4★ Flying Serpent)**

On the tenth day, as they neared the base of the mountain range, they encountered **their hardest challenge yet**.

A **flying serpent**, thin and long like a whip, circled above them. Its wings were bat-like but tipped with feathers, and its eyes glowed yellow. Its body was covered in **dense plated hide**, and from its jaw it could spit **corrosive acid**.

**Mutated Sky Serpent (4★)**

* **Flight / Speed / Area Control**
* **Ability**: Acid Breath (Green Grade Lv 1)
* **Scales**: Grade 2 natural armor

The serpent dived — acid hissing through the air. Kael rolled aside but some droplets burned his arm, sizzling through his leather wrap.

Cherry, already airborne through a psionic jump, met the beast mid-sky. She **slashed with Claw Arc**, but the beast’s natural armor repelled most of it. She was flung backward by its tail sweep and slammed into a boulder, cracking it.

Kael narrowed his eyes. He could see the weak spots between the wings — thin, leathery gaps.

He waited… waited…

And then dashed. His spear **glowed faintly**, not with aura, but with **concentration and perfect technique**. He launched his strongest move:

**Spiral Drive Thrust – Intermediate Lv 2 Technique**  
A double-twist mid-thrust that builds kinetic energy for armor penetration.

The spear slammed into the wing socket — **just as Cherry used Psionic Bond (Blue Grade Lv 2)** to momentarily paralyze the serpent mid-flight.

The thrust **pierced**, the serpent shrieked, losing control mid-air.

Cherry, injured but relentless, landed atop it, drove her claws into its skull, and with a roar, finished it off.

“Tough bastard,” Kael muttered, panting heavily.

“They’re getting stronger,” Cherry said, limping slightly. “So should we.”

The rest of the journey to the base of the mountains was uneventful compared to these deadly encounters. But one thing was certain:

The **monsters were evolving.**  
Faster. Smarter. Stronger.

Kael looked toward the rising mountain peaks.

“If this is just the beginning… I’ll need to reach new levels. Fast.”

Cherry nodded silently beside him.  
The mountains awaited — and with them, far greater trials.

**Chapter 52 – One Year in the Wild**  
**(Two Years Since the Emergence)**

The wind howled down from the Eastern Mountains — colder, fiercer, and heavier with danger than it had ever been a year ago. What was once a harsh, untamed frontier was now a true crucible — a world where only the strong could survive, let alone grow.

A full year had passed since Kael and Cherry began their ascetic training at the foot of the mountains. The lands were now crawling with beasts of terrifying strength — **7-star to 9.9-star monsters roamed freely**, reshaping the natural hierarchy.

But Kael and Cherry endured. And they rose.

**Kael – The Warrior Ascending**

The boy who had once stood at 6’1 with a lean fighter’s build had transformed.

Now **6’4**, Kael was **broad-shouldered, muscular, and weather-hardened**. His frame rippled with compact strength earned through daily battles, brutal training, and endless strain. His body bore **numerous scars** — trophies of survival. His **reflexes were predatory**, and his eyes sharper, calmer, always scanning, always calculating.

**Kael’s Physical Stats (9.6★ Human Warrior):**

* **Height**: 6’4
* **Weight**: 230 lbs of dense, lean muscle
* **Reflexes**: Able to parry attacks at sub-second intervals
* **Speed**: Short bursts rival beast-level dash speeds
* **Weapon Mastery**: Lv 3 – *Advanced Spear Techniques*
* **Current Weapon**:  
  + **Name**: *Stonefang Spear*
  + **Grade**: Grade 2 Weapon
  + **Material**: Forged from the **core and femur** of an 8-star *Mountain Ape Beast*
  + **Properties**: Heavy impact shock, durability, enhanced energy conduction
  + **Signature Move**: *The Rowing Spear Against the Waves* – An advanced anti-mobility spear technique involving rotational momentum to displace enemy stance and throw off aerial balance.

Kael's aura was building but had **not yet reached Lv 5**, the threshold where true aura control begins.  
His **power level hovered around 9.6-star**, brushing the edge of the **legendary 10-star threshold** — but he still lacked the final catalyst: a breakthrough moment.

**Cherry – The Crimson Beast Ascendant**

Cherry was no longer merely a lithe feline mutant. In her **expanded form**, she now reached the **size of a small truck**, around **12 feet tall at the shoulder**, and over **20 feet in length**. Her fur retained its **glossy crimson hue**, but now shimmered with faint psychic waves when agitated. Her claws were **razor-like extensions**, capable of slicing through most Grade 2 monster armor.

She had also **evolved mentally**, now able to produce **guttural, gibberish speech**, fragments of words. Though not coherent to outsiders, **Kael understood every intention through their strengthened psionic bond**.

**Cherry’s Attributes (9.9★ Mutant Cat Beast):**

* **Height**: 12 ft (in expanded form)
* **Weight**: ~2,000 kg
* **Speed**: Blinding short bursts; capable of scaling cliff faces
* **Claw Arc**: White Grade → now **White Grade Lv 3**
* **Psionic Bond**: **Blue Grade Lv 3**  
  + Full mental sync, directional awareness, and shared pain/sense mapping
* **Special Mutation**: *Bone Spine Thrusts* (passive defense mechanism, still undeveloped)

However, Cherry had **reached a bottleneck**.

The invisible ceiling between **9.9-star and 10-star** was unlike anything they’d faced. **No amount of training alone could break it.**

**The Bottleneck: A Universal Truth**

Everyone — human or beast — faced this wall.  
To ascend beyond 10-star, one must undergo **evolution**, not merely growth.

Cherry’s options were:

1. **Consume the core of a 10-star beast of her lineage** (Feline or Psionic-based).
2. **Undergo a life-threatening, primal battle** that awakens **ancient beast blood**.
3. **Consume multiple cores from different lineages** — a risky, often failed path that **distorts growth or causes madness**.

Kael faced the same truth. He was nearing 10-star but **lacked a monster core or moment of awakening**. Their long year of training had brought them close — but close was not enough.

**Encounters with the Titans**

During this one year:

* They **fought dozens of 7–9.5 star monsters**, sometimes daily.
* **Twice**, they encountered **true 10-star beasts**:  
  + One was a **Sky-Wyrm**, a serpent with elemental control over winds, which they barely escaped.
  + Another was a **Burrowing Tusk Golem**, which simply ignored them after sensing they weren’t worth killing.

These beasts were not just powerful — they were **intelligent, territorial, and calculating**, different from the beasts Kael once knew. **Their aura could bend lesser monsters into submission**, making entire regions **uninhabitable**.

**The Present Moment**

Now, standing atop a cliff overlooking a vast valley surrounded by ancient monoliths, Kael adjusted the grip on his Stonefang Spear.

Cherry stood beside him, eyes glowing softly, her breath fogging the cool air.

“Kaa-elll... down... there...” she growled in broken words, her massive paw pointing toward the valley.  
“Something... stirrrring... big.”

Kael narrowed his eyes.

In the valley below, **trees trembled**, and **the wind reversed direction**. Something was coming.

“You feel it too,” Kael said, gripping his weapon tighter. “This could be the one.”

Cherry gave a low growl, something between anticipation and bloodthirst.

Whether it was **a path forward** or **a final test**, they would know soon enough.

**Chapter 53 – Claws of the Sky**

The skies above the valley churned with unnatural gusts. The clouds twisted and spiraled, forming a funnel of wind that roared like a hungry predator.

Kael stood still atop a jagged rock ledge, his **Stonefang Spear** humming faintly in his hand. Beside him, Cherry’s massive form crouched low, her **fur bristling**, eyes glowing a steady crimson. The **air pressure dropped**, and every instinct in Kael’s body screamed:

**Something’s coming.**

**Iris’s Alert**

A soft chime echoed from his wrist — the smooth voice of **Iris**, his AI companion, resonated in his ear.

**Iris:** "Kael, anomalous energy signature detected — distance: 320 meters, elevation: above ground. Category: Grade 10 threat. Type: aerial predator — approximation: mutated Pantherine variant. Recommended protocol: avoidance or full lethality."

Kael exhaled, gripping the shaft of his spear tighter.

“We don’t avoid anymore, Iris.”

**Cherry (growling):** “It comesss...”

A shadow flashed across the sky.

**Arrival of the Sky Panther**

With a screeching roar, the **Sky Panther** descended in a swirling funnel of wind. Its sleek, **emerald fur shimmered like a blade**, and across its back, **bony ridges protruded like jagged sails**, allowing it to **glide effortlessly with wind propulsion**.

Its **eyes glowed a pale teal**, and from its maw, a sudden **Wind Arc** lashed out — slicing through the earth in a crescent of compressed air.

Kael dodged to the side, barely escaping the blast, but his **left shoulder was grazed**, cutting through the leather of his armor.

Cherry snarled, her body phasing into blur as she **dodged the second arc**, the force **ripping a shallow trench** behind her.

**The Opening Salvo**

Kael planted his foot forward and **spun his spear**, invoking:

**“Rowing the Spear Against the Waves!”**

He lunged with brutal force. The spear’s rotational energy **disrupted the wind around the panther**, striking its flank. The Sky Panther shrieked, stumbling mid-air and landing roughly on the valley floor, claws tearing through the soil.

Cherry pounced from behind, claws alight with **Claw Arc Lv 3**, creating a **burst of crescent energy slashes** that trailed behind each swipe.

One connected — slicing through the panther’s side and drawing blood. But the beast twisted its body unnaturally, catching Cherry with a **backward tail whip**. The spiked tail smashed into her flank, sending her crashing into a boulder with a growl of pain.

**Iris’s Commentary**

**Iris:** “Beast structure analyzed. Wind-based acceleration glands located along the spinal ridge. Vulnerable points at lower abdomen and base of tail. Suggest flanking maneuver combined with stagger disruption.”

“Got it,” Kael muttered, dashing to the side, his eyes never leaving the beast.

He circled left; Cherry pushed from the right. They had done this a hundred times in training — flank, stagger, then strike with synced abilities.

**Panther's Counterstrike**

But the **Sky Panther was not desperate yet.**

With a deep, guttural growl, the air condensed around its form. Its **mutated ridges glowed**, and in a blink, the creature **accelerated using a burst of wind pressure**, becoming a blur.

Kael barely raised his spear in time. The beast **crashed into him**, slamming him backward. His **armor cracked**, ribs bruised, and the wind knocked clean from his lungs.

Cherry lunged to protect him — but the panther twisted mid-air, using its **wind gliding trait** to land behind her and **rake her side** with its claws. Cherry screeched in pain, her **right shoulder bleeding** and limping now.

**The Breaking Point**

Kael coughed, slowly rising, blood dripping from his lips.

“Cherry... status?”

**Cherry (low growl):** “Still... can... fight.”

**Iris:** “Warning: Vital signs deteriorating. Syncing psionic output is advised. Risk level: high.”

Kael looked at Cherry — their eyes met.

Something passed between them.

“Let’s end this.”

**Final Combo – Claw Arc × Psionic Bond × Spear Technique**

Kael closed his eyes — letting the **psionic bond** surge to its peak. It was like stepping into Cherry’s mind — raw instincts, emotions, and intent flowed into him.

He roared and **threw his spear into a spin**, his feet moving with perfect alignment — like rowing through invisible tides.

Cherry responded, her **claws alight**, her body flickering with psychic sparks. They launched together.

The **Sky Panther**, recognizing danger, built another wind charge.

Too slow.

* **Cherry dashed first**, unleashing **Claw Arc Lv 3** — the psychic blades **slammed into the wind bubble**, destabilizing the beast’s acceleration.
* In that split second, **Kael spun through the broken air**, channeling **Rowing Spear Against the Waves**, and lunged —
* The spear **pierced directly into the lower abdomen**, **where Iris had identified the vulnerable point**.

The impact sent a **shockwave** through the panther’s body — its legs buckled, eyes wide.

Cherry followed through — claws **sinking into its side**, tearing through flesh, pinning it down.

Kael pulled the spear free, flipped it once, and **drove it into the base of the tail**, splitting the spine.

The **Sky Panther screamed**, thrashed once, then lay still — green blood pooling beneath it.

**Aftermath**

Kael staggered back, panting, body trembling from exertion.

**Iris:** “Target neutralized. Estimated power drained: 78%. Injuries critical but non-lethal. Psionic resonance: stabilized.”

Cherry limped to Kael’s side, lowering her head.

**Cherry (murmuring):** “We... did... it...”

Kael placed a hand on her snout.

“Together. As always.”

He looked down at the panther’s broken body. Its **core had not dispersed**. A **glowing sphere of pale green** pulsed faintly in its chest — a **10-star core**.

Kael looked at Cherry, then back at the core.

“You’re at the edge. This… this might be it.”

Cherry looked at the core — then at Kael — and gave a soft growl.

**Cherry:** “Let’s... break... through.”

**Chapter 54 – Roads of Blood and Spark**

The sun filtered gently through the broken canopy above, shimmering on the blood-soaked soil where the Sky Panther lay slain. Its body was still, lifeless—but power pulsed faintly from within its ruined chest.

Kael sat against the gnarled trunk of a nearby tree, arms wrapped loosely around his legs, his body still aching from the battle. Across from him, Cherry sat quietly, her massive frame folded into a resting pose, her crimson eyes fixed on the slowly cooling corpse of the panther.

The shimmering **10-star core** nestled within its chest gave off a faint, emerald glow, as if breathing in silence.

**The Core’s Verdict**

**Kael:** “So... is that it? The breakthrough we were hoping for?”

Cherry limped over to the beast’s side, her paw tapping lightly against the exposed core. She sniffed it once, then again—her nose twitching—and then suddenly turned away with a grumble.

**Cherry:** “Grrrr... nuh... noh... bloo... noo fit.”

She gave a disappointed huff and flopped onto her side.

**Kael:** “Not suitable, huh?”

**Iris (soft chime):** “Confirmed. Genetic resonance between Cherry’s bloodline and the Sky Panther’s core is below 40%. Compatibility insufficient for safe absorption. Attempt may cause backlash or core rejection.”

Kael frowned. “Figures. Guess that would’ve been too easy.”

**Iris:** “Suggest alternate method. Trigger ancient lineage blood via high-stress awakening—possibly through psychic strain, near-death combat experience, or an alchemic catalyst tied to her beast ancestry.”

Cherry blinked slowly, as if understanding only half of it.

**Cherry:** “Bluhh... fiiiight... eep boom... raahh?”

Kael laughed dryly. “Yeah, something like that.”

**Blood and Meat**

Despite the core being incompatible, the beast's **flesh and blood** still pulsed with energy — rich with dense power, infused with traces of wind and vitality. They didn’t let it go to waste.

Kael skewered a thick slab of meat over the fire, its fatty juices sizzling and crackling. He bit into it, tasting a flood of warmth and power flow through his limbs. **His star power—previously stalled at 9.6—rose slowly, stopping at 9.8.**

**Iris:** “Energy absorption successful. Minor increase in star ranking. Cellular density optimized. Muscular strain recovery accelerated.”

Cherry devoured her share in near silence, the glow of her claws flickering faintly as the blood in her body adjusted.

**Cherry:** “Mmmm... good... meat. Booost... me.”

Kael raised an eyebrow at her.

“Did you just say boost me?”

**Cherry:** “Mmmmmaybe.”

They both sat in silence for a while, digesting food, strength, and thoughts.

**Descent and Discovery**

The mountain they had fought upon was steep, treacherous. But with rest and determination, they made their way down slowly.

At the mountain’s base, they found a **derelict air bike** half-buried under collapsed stone and moss. It was a long, sleek machine — built for high-speed surface glide and low-altitude hover, though the engine casing was cracked, and the stabilizer core was misaligned.

Kael knelt beside it, brushing off the grime.

“Think we can fix this?”

**Iris:** “Assessment complete. With available materials, 67% functionality can be restored. Estimated repair time: 2 hours.”

“That’ll do.”

Cherry sniffed the bike, then jumped atop it and sat like a massive cat waiting to be chauffeured.

**On the Road**

It took a little over two hours. Kael patched together a working stabilizer with pieces from old drones, rerouted energy through the emergency bypass line, and reinforced the frame using beast sinew and bone.

As the sun began its descent, they launched.

The air bike buzzed to life, hovering inches off the ground. Kael leaned forward, Cherry curled up behind him in her **compact resting form**, no larger than a particularly fluffy backpack.

They sped across open grasslands, broken concrete highways swallowed by wild overgrowth, and glided past remnants of small villages now consumed by vines and trees. The **wind on his face** carried dust, heat, and a strangely nostalgic warmth.

**Conversation in the Wind**

**Cherry (murmuring):** “Zoom zoom... wooosshhh...”

Kael chuckled.

“Yeah, zoom zoom.”

**Iris:** “...Emotion detection algorithm triggered.”

Kael blinked. “What?”

**Iris:** “...Unusual response detected. Context: amusement. It seems... I attempted humor?”

“You... tried to joke?”

**Iris (hesitant):** “Unintentional. Possible subroutine interference. I will run diagnostics.”

Kael smirked. “No, don’t. It was cute. Keep it.”

Iris was silent for a moment, then replied:

**Iris:** “...Acknowledged.”

**CloverSpark City**

By late afternoon, the towering silhouette of **CloverSpark** came into view.

It was a **city built into a canyon basin**, a mix of ancient pre-collapse concrete and newer metallic constructions. Energy towers hummed, drones buzzed overhead, and a wall of vertical gates greeted them at the south entrance.

As they slowed down near the checkpoint, a series of mechanical voices echoed:

**“Identify yourself.”**

Kael stopped the air bike, pulling down his scarf.

“Name: Kael Ardyn.”

A pause.

A mechanical whirring sound followed as an automated drone scanned him from a distance.

**“Searching records... match found. Parental ties: Alen and Sarai Ardyn. Status: deceased.”**

Kael’s jaw clenched slightly.

“Yes... I know.”

**“Subject ‘Kael Ardyn’ marked as MISSING in all known databases. Last trace: six months post initial emergence of ancient beasts. Updating registry now. Proceed to the designated zone for further evaluation.”**

A blue light pulsed ahead, signaling the path forward.

Interestingly, no one questioned or even noticed Cherry. **She padded alongside the bike, ignored, her presence bypassed entirely**, as if her low profile form rendered her just another stray animal.

Kael raised an eyebrow, amused.

“No one’s scanning you.”

**Cherry:** “Nyeh heh... ninja kitty.”

**Iris:** “Observation: Cherry’s current form emits minimal power signals and visual threat cues. Civilian scanners unlikely to register her unless specifically targeted.”

Kael grinned.

“Let’s keep it that way. For now.”

As they rolled into the city proper, the noise of civilization surrounded them — market vendors, children playing near alleys, the scent of food and smoke.

**Kael (quietly):** “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen a place like this, huh?”

**Cherry (nuzzling his shoulder):** “Hoooooome?”

Kael looked up, eyes distant.

“Not quite... but maybe one day.”

The gates of CloverSpark closed behind them.

**Chapter 55 – Echoes of Power**

The moment the air-bike hovered to a stop at the edge of **CloverSpark City**, things shifted.

A dozen armed **city military guards**, clad in sleek black-plated armor with faint blue energy lines, closed in from all sides. **Energy rifles** were drawn, low but ready. The glint in their visors meant they weren’t just curious — they were cautious.

Iris chimed calmly.

**Iris:** “Threat assessment initiated. Scanning... all soldiers exhibit power levels between 4.8 to 5.2 star rank. Tactical advantage is neutral.”

Kael didn’t flinch. He raised his hands calmly while stepping off the air-bike.

**Kael:** “Easy now. Not here to start anything.”

One of the soldiers, a woman with short-cropped hair and a steely gaze, stepped forward, raising a **silver device** with a glowing spiral tip. As it beeped, her brow furrowed. She checked the screen, then stared toward Cherry, who sat quietly behind Kael.

**Soldier:** “Detected unknown beast energy. Power ranking abnormal. Preparing suppressive binding—”

**Kael (firmly):** “Stop. Stand down.”

Cherry growled lowly, her **fur bristling**, the red hue of her claws faintly glowing. She didn’t leap yet, but her stance was a clear threat.

**Cherry:** “Hhhnnnhhh... bitesss…”

**Kael (calmly turning to her):** “Hey. Easy, girl. Not yet. We’re not enemies.”

Kael knelt beside her and rested a hand on her back. Her breathing slowed.

**Kael (softly):** “We’ve had worse days, haven’t we?”

She blinked once, then gave a soft huff and sat again, tail flicking in irritation.

**Kael (to soldiers):** “We’re not strangers to the military. I was stationed under **Commander Darius**, back during the beast tide last year. He knows us. We fought together.”

The lead soldier hesitated, eyes narrowing. She raised her wrist-comm and transmitted Kael’s words.

**The Chain of Command**

It took fifteen minutes before the first superior arrived. Then another ten.

The soldiers maintained formation, though their grips on weapons were slightly more relaxed. Cherry dozed with one eye open, while Kael leaned on the bike, arms crossed.

**Cherry:** “Snoooore... bitey dream...”

Kael chuckled, watching her twitch a paw.

**Kael:** “You dreaming of fighting again?”

**Cherry (sleepily):** “Mmm... win... snack... zoom...”

**Iris:** “Cherry exhibits unusual REM cycle behavior. Dream content analysis not possible. Emotional tone: aggressive... and slightly hungry.”

**Kael:** “Figures.”

The sun began to dip lower behind the mountain ridge when a convoy of matte-gray hover-vehicles approached.

The side doors hissed open. A tall man in an officer’s uniform stepped out, **grizzled**, with sharp green eyes and a star-emblazoned cape brushing the ground. He was followed by a well-dressed, slim man with silver-trimmed robes and a governor’s seal pinned to his chest.

**Iris (quietly):** “Scanning. Lieutenant Colonel... name: **Reyn Albrecht**. Star power: 8.9. Governor... name: **Tyros Vellein**. Civilian, no combat rank.”

Reyn strode forward with authority but no hostility. He gave Kael a long look, then smiled slightly.

**Reyn:** “You must be **Kael Ardyn**... and this fierce one must be Cherry.”

Cherry opened one eye, sizing him up.

**Reyn (bowing slightly):** “Apologies for the delay. We had to confirm the records. Commander Darius mentioned you both in our last transmission three months ago. Spoke highly of your… resilience.”

**Kael (nods):** “Good to hear he’s still alive.”

**Governor Tyros:** “Ahem… welcome to CloverSpark, Mr. Ardyn. We do hope this was not too unpleasant.”

**Kael:** “Only mildly uncomfortable. Your people aim guns well.”

Reyn chuckled and pulled a cylindrical scanner from his belt.

**Reyn:** “With your permission, I’d like to perform a formal scan. Darius mentioned your power had spiked rapidly. We’d like to verify.”

Kael nodded. “Go ahead.”

The scanner pulsed once, humming softly as it swept over him. Then it beeped.

And Reyn froze.

His eyebrows shot up. Then he turned the scanner to confirm.

**Reyn (shouting):** “Star level... **9.8**?!”

The entire clearing went quiet.

Even the soldiers, trying to look stoic, shifted in disbelief. The governor coughed, clearly stunned.

**Governor Tyros (stammering):** “T-That’s… that’s just 0.2 away from a full Ten-Star Ascendant!”

One of the younger soldiers audibly gasped. Cherry gave a satisfied little purr.

**Cherry:** “Told ya... boss strong.”

Reyn stepped back, eyes wide with a mix of awe and concern.

**Reyn:** “...Darius wasn’t exaggerating.”

He looked at Kael again, more carefully this time. Not as a civilian. Not even as a former soldier. But as someone… more.

**Reyn (quietly):** “The city will want to speak with you. About a great many things.”

Kael didn’t answer. He simply glanced down at Cherry, who stretched and cracked her claws.

And the wind whispered quietly through the city gates behind them, as if something had shifted.

**Chapter 56 – The City Within the Storm**

Kael watched as the soldiers stood frozen in place, their eyes darting between him and Cherry. The wind had stilled. A hush lingered. The only sound came from the humming scanner in **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht’s** hand, the light still glowing softly in pale green hues.

Then, Reyn blinked.

**Reyn:** “Alright... now her turn. I have clearance for advanced scans.”

He kneeled slowly before Cherry, keeping his movements measured. Cherry squinted suspiciously but didn’t growl.

**Kael (to Cherry):** “It’s fine. Just a scan.”

**Cherry (squinting):** “Sniff… okay box-man…”

Reyn raised an eyebrow at the nickname but didn’t comment. He activated the **Advanced Beast Core Resonance Scanner**, a long metallic rod with faint runes along its sides—likely military-issue tech designed for high-level beast detection and analysis. The tip shimmered as it swept over Cherry.

A tone pinged.

Then the scanner **shook violently** in Reyn’s hand. Its display flickered.

**Reyn (frowning):** “That’s… what? This can’t be right.”

Another sweep. Same result. He adjusted the calibrations and tried once more.

The screen now glowed red—emergency class scan.

**Scanner Output:** “Beast Power Level: **9.9** Star. Resonant Bond Detected. Psionic Interface Established.”

**Reyn (wide-eyed):** “Nine point... nine?!”

Gasps echoed again. The nearby officers’ faces lost color. Even the usually stoic Tyros Vellein stumbled back half a step.

**Governor Tyros:** “T-That’s beyond… Even among high commanders, that power is rare. She's... barely below god-tier…”

**Kael:** “Told you she’s not a pet.”

Cherry yawned, unimpressed with the dramatic reaction.

**Cherry:** “I bite sky cats. Zoom fast. Me strong.”

**Iris (flatly):** “Confirmed. Cherry is indeed ‘strong’—by at least three metric definitions. Additional analysis... pending.”

**Reyn:** “I see why Darius was so damn obsessed with keeping tabs on you two...”

He took a deep breath and composed himself.

**Reyn (firmly):** “Come. The governor and I will escort you personally. The Council would want to know you’ve arrived.”

**Journey Through Cloverspark**

They rode in a large, armored hover-cruiser marked with the emblem of **Cloverspark City Defense** — a leaf symbol partially enclosed by a shifting energy ring.

As they entered the city perimeter, the once-foreboding gates opened to reveal a **thriving, mutated society**.

Kael’s gaze drifted to the bustling streets beyond the checkpoints.

Children with glowing eyes laughed while chasing dogs that had evolved thick, chitinous tails for balance. Vendors sold skewered meat—Kael could smell beast-flesh roasting over open plasma grates. One stall sold glowing fruit that shimmered faintly with energy—likely mutation-safe hybrids.

The city had a strange serenity.

Behind thick barriers and advanced turrets, **life** still bloomed.

**Kael:** “I didn’t expect this much… normal.”

**Tyros (smiling faintly):** “Normal’s changed. Since the Mutation Pulse began five years ago, adaptation became the only path forward.”

**Reyn:** “Our children are born with core potential now. Even civilians undergo routine energy harmonization to stabilize their bodies.”

Iris projected a map of the city.

**Iris:** “Population: approximately 61,000. Star power average: 1.4. Median: 1.1. Highest recorded civilian power: 4.3 star. Military average: 3.6. Conclusion: City is statistically resilient.”

**Kael:** “But not immune to the outside world.”

**Reyn:** “No. We’re safe only because we stay alert. And because of people like you.”

They passed an arena where teenagers sparred—some firing off small energy arcs, others teleporting in short bursts or clashing with elemental weapons. The people didn’t stare at the military cruiser—Kael realized this sort of movement was routine.

**Kael (quietly):** “So even the kids train now.”

**Tyros:** “Every citizen must. It’s not militarization. It’s survival.”

Cherry leaned out the window, her eyes wide.

**Cherry:** “Ooooh... zoom house! Bite-juice fruit! Smell food!”

She pressed her paw to the glass.

**Kael:** “She wants food again.”

**Reyn (amused):** “We can arrange that.”

Further in, they passed a **giant crystal tower**—white, with metallic roots anchoring it into the earth. Pulsing softly, it was surrounded by dozens of scientists and energy monitors.

**Iris:** “Mutation Core Tower detected. Function: ambient radiation filtration and core stabilization. Risk: minimal.”

**Reyn:** “That tower keeps us from mutating too quickly. Every city needs one now.”

Kael noticed a man on a bench levitating small stones while reading to his daughter. A bakery shop assistant with **silver fur patches** passed them, her beast-blood evident but unbothered. Soldiers marched alongside civilians laughing in cafes.

It wasn’t utopia. But it was... **humanity enduring**.

**Toward the Inner Ring**

As the cruiser moved toward the Inner Ring District, the streets widened. The buildings became sleeker. Tall silver towers hummed with energy. Massive screens displayed news footage—Kael caught glimpses of mutated beasts in far regions, broken ruins, and elite patrols.

Then, the screen flicked to show... **his own face**.

**Newscaster:** “...speculations increase around the identity of a high-star rogue combatant seen near the Darkfang Range last week. The mysterious figure—rumored to have defeated a Ten-Star mutated Sky Panther—remains unidentified.”

**Kael (dryly):** “Guess I’m news now.”

**Reyn (grinning):** “Just wait till the Council sees the scanner data.”

**Iris:** “Probability of media leak: 93%. Likely public designation: ‘Wandering Titan’ or ‘Feral Spearmaster.’”

**Cherry (snorting):** “He Kael. Big hero now. I want cake.”

They all chuckled.

**Kael:** “You’ll get your cake.”

**Arrival**

The vehicle slowed before a towering facility marked “**CloverSpark Command Nexus**.”

Guards saluted Reyn and Tyros as they stepped out.

A curved glass wall ahead opened into a white hallway pulsing with soft light. Kael could already feel the energy arrays activating.

**Iris:** “We are approaching secure zones. Permission granted for non-aggressive beast-companions. Cherry registered as ‘Sentient Beast Ally.’”

**Cherry (strutting):** “Heh. Told you. Fancy kitty.”

**Reyn:** “This way. You’ll speak with the Council soon. But first… rest, food, and debriefing.”

Kael looked around the facility as they entered. Smooth white panels. Walls reinforced with **crystal-laced alloys**. The distant hum of machinery below. This place wasn’t just a military center—it was the **nucleus of city survival**.

And he’d stepped back into the world of the powerful.

But now, things were different.

He wasn’t a fading soldier anymore.

He was **Kael Ardyn** — bearer of 9.8 stars, bonded to a sentient 9.9 star beast, and shadowed by mysteries that reached far beyond even his own past.

**Chapter 57 – The Shadows of Power**

The **CloverSpark Command Nexus** was a hive of purpose and discipline. As Kael walked through its gleaming corridors, accompanied by **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht** and **Governor Tyros Vellein**, the atmosphere shifted. Gone were the curious civilians and relaxed security. In this heart of the military city, everything tightened—posture, conversation, and gaze.

And Kael could feel **the stares**.

Soldiers, analysts, officers, and advisors turned their heads. Conversations stopped mid-sentence. Even the guards at checkpoints barely blinked as their systems quietly ran scans on Kael and Cherry. Most tried to hide their curiosity, but Kael felt the subtle tension.

**Iris** projected overlays of individuals around them.

**Iris (in Kael’s ear):** “Proximity scan: 43 ranked military officials. Star power range: 4.0 to 7.2. Civilian scientists and tacticians: range 3.0 to 5.5. Multiple tracking sensors activated.”

**Cherry (to Kael, half-growling):** “They stare too long. Can I hiss?”

**Kael:** “No hissing. Yet.”

One officer whispered to another:

“Is that really him? The Wanderer who fought at Black Hollow?”

“That’s the beast... look at her fur. Glows with psionic signature.”

As they walked toward the cafeteria, Kael kept his posture relaxed but alert. Cherry padded beside him, tail twitching lightly.

**The Cafeteria Encounter**

The doors slid open into a large dining hall filled with clean metallic tables, soft lighting, and trays stacked with colorful food and nutrient-rich rations. At least two hundred personnel were eating, and most stopped as Kael entered.

Silence.

Then murmurs rose—low but spreading fast. People turned. Forks paused mid-air. Even a group of elite scouts wearing dark blue command armor stood up briefly as a sign of respect when Reyn entered, then looked at Kael with interest.

**Reyn (chuckling):** “Enjoy the fame while it’s still amusing.”

**Kael:** “I’m used to shadows. Lights feel awkward.”

**Tyros:** “Unfortunately, when your power spikes to 9.8 and your companion registers as 9.9, shadows tend to vanish.”

They guided Kael and Cherry to a reserved table near the center of the room. Food was quickly arranged—thick roast beast cuts, nutrient paste enriched with elemental salts, energy-core broth. Cherry practically launched at her dish.

**Cherry (muffled):** “Mmmff. Bite-good. Real meat!”

**Kael (smiling):** “She approves.”

The Colonel and Governor exchanged nods, then stood.

**Reyn:** “We’ll leave you in capable—if slightly over-enthusiastic—hands.”

**Tyros:** “This one knows our structure like the back of his palm. Try not to let him talk your ears off.”

From behind them emerged a tall, wiry man in a sleek gray suit, his glasses displaying HUD overlays. He held a digital notepad and wore a permanent, polite smile.

**Reyn:** “Kael, meet **Lenton Marris**. Government liaison. He’ll handle your needs within the city.”

**Lenton (bowing):** “Honored, honored indeed, Mr. Ardyn. I’m your humble coordinator, assistant, and if need be, personal guide. You will find me prompt, resourceful, and—in most situations—unnecessarily thorough.”

**Cherry (licking her paw):** “He smells nervous.”

**Kael (smirking):** “I can tell.”

**Through the Halls of Power**

After lunch, Lenton guided Kael to his temporary quarters within the Officer’s Wing. The corridor was wide and polished, with doors sealed by biometric access.

As they walked, Lenton began… **talking**.

**Lenton:** “Now, the city, as you’ve likely noticed, is a Tier-2 reserve zone. Currently one of **fifty** officially recognized **Protected Habitation Zones** within Japan. Each zone supports populations ranging from 20,000 to 150,000 and is safeguarded by advanced barriers, crystal reactors, and division-level defense units.”

**Kael:** “Tier-2, huh. What’s Tier-1?”

**Lenton:** “Only five exist. They’re practically fortresses. Tokyo Remnant City, Mount Fushin High Command, Sapporo Bastion, the Kyoto Core Archives, and the Floating Port of Enkai.”

Kael listened as they passed a hall filled with historical murals—scenes of the Mutation Pulse’s early years, the collapse of coastal zones, and heroes who rose and fell.

**Lenton:** “Japan is split into **five operational divisions**—East, West, North, South, and Central. Each controls roughly ten zones and is led by a commanding entity—typically an **Ascended**—someone with a star power exceeding 10.0.”

Kael raised an eyebrow.

**Kael:** “Ascended, huh. So... god-tier warriors with territory.”

**Lenton:** “Precisely. It has become... political. Each division has its own ideologies. Power draws power.”

They reached a crystal elevator. Inside, the panel lit up with layers of floors—Kael’s room was on level 21, designated “Elite Guest Quarters.”

**Lenton (continuing):** “As of this year, **seventeen Ascended-level warriors** have been recorded in Japan. Would you like a breakdown?”

**Kael (sighing):** “Sure.”

**Lenton:** “Excellent! So, we begin with **Kaoru Mizuchi**, known as the *Tempest Blade*, a 10.4 star-ranked swordswoman leading the Western Division. Then there’s **General Hideo Ren**, 11.2 stars, with rumored time-manipulation affinity. He oversees the Southern Corridor.”

**Kael:** “Time… manipulation?”

**Lenton (nodding):** “Brief bursts. He slows time during battle phases.”

He went on, listing names and powers:

* **Yoru Seiran** – The *Whisper of Blades*, 10.1 stars, illusion-type affinity.
* **Mara Kanzuki** – *Ashfire Monarch*, 10.8 stars, pyrokinetic with beast control.
* **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – 10.3 stars, durable earth-type brute.
* **Faye Illena** – 12.0 stars, psychic seer and memory manipulator.
* **Tenjin Ralnor** – 10.6 stars, wind-elemental combatant.
* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – 11.4 stars, stealth and phase-shift specialist.
* **Borran Kazume** – 10.5 stars, radiation warrior from Northern Ice Fields.
* **Seiji Dran** – 13.0 stars. Head of the Central Division. The strongest known human.

Kael stopped walking.

**Kael (tense):** “Repeat that last one.”

**Lenton:** “Ah, yes. **Seiji Dran** of the **Dran family**. Leader of the Central Division. Possibly the strongest mutant-enhanced human alive. His ascended ability is not disclosed but believed to be of space manipulation. Estimated to hold a theoretical maximum of 13.4 stars. Formerly was... hmm, where was that document…”

Kael didn’t hear the rest.

His mind froze on the name: **Dran**.

The same surname as **Elise Dran** — his instructor, the one who trained him in the *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves* technique, a Dran family spear technique. She had been the one to guide him through his training with discipline and care. He had met her last year during the beast tide, where they fought side by side. Despite the turmoil, a bond had formed, and he had grown quite fond of her.

Before he had left, Elise had told him to seek out the **Dran family** when he visited the capital, but she never explained why.

**Kael (murmuring):** “Dran… Elise…”

**Cherry (quietly):** “Kael? You okay?”

His fists clenched.

**Kael (coldly):** “How many from the Dran family are still alive?”

**Lenton:** “Oh, a few… but not publicly. They’re quite secretive. Why do you ask?”

Kael’s stare hardened, shadows flickering in his eyes.

**Kael (flatly):** “No reason.”

But something had changed.

The strongest man in Japan was from the same family as **Elise**.