Night falls upon a desolate day; I guess the only console or refuge about it is that I am alive to live another. The army is a lot like kindergarten: there’s plenty of shit to throw and never enough places to put someone in “time-out.” We find ourselves sleeping on makeshift beds, but I cannot sleep. The sound of screaming in the distance is keeping everyone awake, I think. And so I wander around the camp a bit, finding Randal staring through the nitrogen shield. There is not much to look at, just some trees and shrubbery, but I know that beyond that border lies a battlefield of bones and blood.

I feel the need to approach, but hesitance rears its ugly head. I really have never interacted with this man, though I remember him at base camp. He was always the first up the hill and the last off of the shooting range. Hence, it was no surprise that he was the first to run.

“Can’t sleep either?” I say reluctantly. He stares forward. The ground shakes as something detonates in the distance; the crack of the explosion hits us 5 seconds later (thus, no longer away than a mile from here).

“I never got in,” he says.

“What?”

“The pods. I never got in. I made a run for the forest; I had a gut instinct that they’d use the forest, of all places, to house some form of BANTA control. But I was there...look around you,” he says as he sweeps his arms; he’s clearly drunk. “Look for anyone on the floor; count them. The numbers are slim. I was there when the blast wave hit; I saw hundreds turn to ash...” He takes another swig from a bottle; he makes no effort to hide it. The plasticity of the army soldier in a metal helmet with a cigarette behind his ear and a small vial of disclosed liquid is not this day and age; if we are drinking, we don’t hide it.

“That must have been traumatic,” I say as he passes the bottle. I take a long swig as we watch the trees rumble once more; another blast, this time closer. “But you’re alive, right? That’s what matters,” I say as I pat him on the shoulder. Before my fingers make contact, I am suddenly on the ground; he’s on top of me. For a moment I thought he was just playing around, but then came the knife. I have never been stabbed before, at least not up until now. I will be the first to say that it hurts a lot worse than you would think (I am beginning to understand why so many people were being operated on: this guy keeps snapping and stabbing people every night).

Next thing I know, I’m being pulled away in a stretcher and Randal is being wrestled to the ground. A throat is slit; I can tell as the blood explodes in a gruesome glory, splattering against a covalent shield. Four gunshots later and Randal is officially no longer a member of the army, or of BANTA.

Just another dead soldier that could not outrun his past.