A brutal peace. That was the situation of the entire Known Universe. Galaxies upon galaxies teetered on the edge of war and annihilation.

Malekan 5101, a harsh planet on the edge of the Universe, and the latest venture of the Human Sovereignty. The sky was almost pitch dark. The nearest star was far away from this cold planet, as was any moon. It made the night sky look emptier than any other. Malekan 5101 sucked the light and joy out of everything. An average-sized male of the time, a seven-foot-tall man, was walking through a compound, the headquarters of the war against the native peoples. The man had short brown hair and was accompanied by a relatively small and sleek man with black hair, his assistant, who wore a glimmering silver pair of goggles that gave off a vague pale light.

“The native beasts have been pushed towards a corner,” the assistant declared. He seemed to be reading something but there wasn’t anything in front of him, at least that was visible to observers. His hands waved in the air like they were interacting with a screen. “For the final effort, Sir Laré has been ordered to General Brack’s office.” The tall Sir Laré in question squinted, but then quickly hid the expression. The native people were far from beasts, but to the Sovereignty, anything that wasn’t human was a beast.

“Understood. Heading there immediately,” Laré said. His attendant typed back Laré’s reply on the unseen interface, his hands flying. Laré had been on this forsaken planet for years, and as one of the Sovereignty’s soldiers, he had seen its atrocities firsthand. He wound through wide, grey concrete streets. Bleak and practical, just like the Sovereignty. The roads were lit by soft, blue light posts. He arrived at a large mundane building with more spaced-out azure lights in its walls. It had about a dozen hidden turrets in it, ready to kill him if he was an enemy; but he wasn’t, yet.

Laré entered through two automatic doors. They had seemed to be part of the wall before but changed in response to his approach. He headed through the doors to a pitch-black room, saying the name of the General as he entered. The doors closed after him, and then, after only a soft whirr, he walked back out into a completely different room: the hallway to the General’s office. Spatial movement was a tricky thing. The doors to the office opened automatically yet again as he reached it, and there was the General himself, sitting behind a black marble desk. He loved his power.

He had a grey buzz cut, so grey and aged that it almost seemed completely white. His eyes were blue, and they looked like they were dissecting him.

“Lieutenant,” General Brack said, his low gravelly voice echoing deeply through the room.

“General, sir,” Laré said, tying his hands together behind his back and staring straight ahead.

“I’m putting you in charge of the assault on Outpost Theta-Five. There is a delegation of the Allied Systems hiding in there,” his voice boomed. “A last-ditch attempt by the Malekanians. Annihilate both parties. The Regulators will not be involved as it is within the bounds of the Twenty-Third Accord of the Balanced Treaty. The Allied Systems trespassed onto a planet we claimed. The price of such an act is well known, and I trust that you will treat them with the proper response.”

General Brack held his eyes on Laré, who did not wait to reply. “Yes, General.” He saluted, curling his hands into fists, crossing them in front of him, and then thumping them against his chest. Laré wore a black cloak outlined with streaks of gold and silver, his uniform, and had a collar that covered most of his neck. The bottom of the cloak stooped near the floor, dangling above it and casting his feet in dark shadows.

“Begin immediately. Your forces are ready,” the General ordered, waving his hand in a shooing motion.

Laré left the building. It was raining now. Dark red clouds were in the night above. His assistant soon joined him again, wearing a grey uniform, and followed him as he turned into a dark alley. Rain pattered against their uniforms. Water ran past their shoes on the ground. Laré took out a pair of goggles, much like the assistant’s one but cruder and black, from his pant pocket and put them on.

“Begin in five minutes,” he spoke aloud through the goggles.

“Sir Laré, you have me for contact and communication. You are not allowed any non-Sovereignty-sanctioned communicators,” the assistant said, taking one step back and staring at Laré through his silver glasses. “Relinquish the device or I will be forced to report this to higher command.” Laré didn’t turn.

“I don’t care,” Laré muttered.

“Excuse me?” The assistant said.

“I have been under the Sovereignty for far too long.” He gazed into the maroon night above.

“Treason is a First Offense, punishable by immediate death and execution,” the assistant asserted. His high voice was confident and resolute.

“Are you capable of delivering it to me?” Laré looked back at the silver assistant. They weren’t allowed weapons, but Laré was. The assistant took a step back and then ran down the alleyway away from Laré. He had just seemed to begin to send a message when a small sound echoed through the alley, a mere tap, and then the assistant’s body fell. A gold ray burned straight through. The assistant fell to the ground lifeless.

Laré holstered his weapon, a small gold tube with a button on it and a barrel, behind his cloak. He had to get out of the base before it all burned to ash on account of his orders. He sighed. No alarm had sounded, and Laré walked into the night unimpeded. To stop the Sovereignty, to stop all the bloodshed that Laré had long grown sick and tired of, he would do what he had to.

A dream. That’s what this all was. A dream.

Red hot flames burned and brought down skyscrapers, the ground seemed to erupt into fiery explosions, and harsh noises canvased the city. Blankets of black smoke slithered their way high into the dark and starry night, illuminated by the city in flames. The screams were ever so faint, for the crumbling and growling were louder. The roars pierced through the air and attacked the ears of a young teenage boy far away, watching his world burn from a distant green hill.

His body was still and unwavering, but his glassy eyes conveyed the truth as they stared at the city. Cleveland was dying. The tears that had formed at the corners of his eyes reflected a bright orange, and then they fell onto the grassy ground that was covered in grey ash. And then he could bear it no longer, he turned away from the pleads and the crashes and the booms and faced the dark woods behind him. The guttural noises weren’t as loud there, but they were present, dangerously so, but he had no other choice, being in the open was far, far worse. The darkness was attracted by the human presence in the city, so he had to get away, and that he did.

Even before what had happened, it was dangerous to walk alone into a dark forest, and now it was even more so, but the teenager did it anyway, crying and stumbling along in the opposite direction of the screams. The tears blurred his vision, but he didn’t bother to wipe them away, and his breaths were sharp and short, coming with stifled sobs and sniffles. He tripped over roots, trampled right through thorny bushes, got his feet and legs covered in spots of mud, but he kept going, as long as he was heading away from his home, or what was left of it.

The forest hadn’t changed yet, and for the most part it was the same, at least visually. The boy vaguely remembered this area, west of the city, he had been here around it with his father, but he especially remembered the incessant creeks and bites of the insects and the like that accompanied it. Now, however, what filled the boy’s ears was... nothing. An eerie silence, for even the screams from the city were barely heard, permeated the entire area and left the boy shivering and glancing in every direction, afraid of what might come out of the dark. Occasionally, he heard a fierce roar, but they were far away, or at least he hoped.

Eventually, he stopped scrambling, and a quiet walk took its place. He was still shivering and sniffling, but at least now he confidently stuck to a direction. Even if he recalled where it was, he didn’t know how to get there, but it was what his family had left him. He would find it, no matter what.

The darkness felt penetrating, and it left the boy’s skin crawling. His heart pounded heavily, like it too wanted to escape the night. He couldn’t see further than the immediate, and everything left him unsettled. He was not scared of the dark, but the dangers that could be held within it.

If it wasn’t the eerie dark, then it was the mysterious sounds that left the boy in shambles. While the screams of the city were far away, the harrowing tortures of the forest made their presence known. A mere rustle of the trees would snap him to attention, and the boy’s eyes would widen and scan his murky surroundings, only for him to eventually conclude that it was the wind shifting. The scarce crunch of leaves or branches under his feet also set him on edge, and he could only hope that the noise was soft enough.

While he was walking, his body settled into a peaceful trance, however his mind was anything but. Soon, the boy fell victim to the terrible curse of remembrance.

His family had a cabin there, an A-frame two-story wooden cabin, not counting the basement, and it was nice. Once, it was a getaway from the city’s fumes and a much-needed breath of fresh air. Now, it was still a getaway, but for a different reason. They were there last summer, and they had been there many more in his childhood.

Although his family always planned every moment to the wire, with all these excursions and, particularly, hikes planned, the vacation always became what it was meant to be – not a frantic rush to experience everything possible, but a period of relaxation. His mother and father would make the most delectable food that would launch cascades of enticing aromas through the cabin and even outside of it, where the boy would be in the outdoor hot tub with the most satisfied expression. His older brother would be in a hammock next to it, peacefully reading whatever novel filled his current taste, even that terrible fanfiction. His younger sister would be doing something great and wild and fun, or just be in the hot tub with the boy, like he was now.

The mom beckoned for them to come, yelling out their names and mentioning how the food, the sweet and amazing food, was ready, and then the boy and his sister leapt out of the tub and screamed out that they were coming, sending large splashes of water onto the wooden deck and even a few on the reading brother. Luckily, none hit his book, but he still playfully scolded them while he also scrambled out of his hammock, moving to eat.

Dinner, the great unifier, was splendid, but the boy was typically done in a minute or two. He was commonly told to “savor it” but what was the point when he could have more delightful tastes per second if he wolfed it all down. His sister agreed with this idea, and soon they were both done and plopped right onto a couch.

The cabin was filled with light chatter, and the soft crinkling of a homely fire brought a peaceful ambiance. The sun shone through the windows, leaving cool rays that painted the room in bright color. His father was still eating at the wooden table along with his brother, eagerly discussing who knows what. His mother was on the spacious, beige couch with him and his sister, resting together in all sorts of comfortable positions.

His family is… was the best thing in the world to him. And now he was lost, left with only the directions his family gave him. He was scared.

His feet lagged across the shadowy floor of the forest, brushing the blades of grass and leaving the small imprint of a shoe. His body groaned against every single step he took. His previously pale and clear knees were now stained with brown, dirty marks, the remaining evidence of his many falls and tumbles, and his dark-brown eyes were baggy, soaked with stains of tears. His wavy hair spoofed outwards. He had been up for hours, at least, but dawn had yet to arrive, and the night showed only a small sign of leaving, it was a tiny bit brighter now.

Now, the boy could see a bit further, hardly enough for comfort but it was an improvement. What was previously a single mass of darkness now became a canvas of black shapes that he could barely make out. The trees were brown, old, and elegant, and the boy found solace in the old green lives that also experienced the horror of the night, so he continued, albeit slowly, to find the cabin.

The entire journey was a fool’s errand. It was a shot in the dark. Yet, it was all he had left, the last bastion of his sanity, and he needed it in more ways than one. Dark circles had formed under his eyes, but he had reached the day. Dawn leaked through the leaves of the tree roof, casting spots of sunlight over the forest and the grass.

The grass was short, and the forest was, thankfully, not accompanied by too many trees. If it was, he would have bumped his head into many more in the night, more than he already had. The boy brought his hand to the top of his head, caressing his bruises as he winced. Instead, this part of nature had frequent meadows where the trees would part, revealing a bright sun that would pleasantly greet him and pristine clouds in all friendly shapes and figures. The sky blue had never seemed so amazing. These moments were short, but they were loved like a calm in the storm.

Many times, on the night before, he had felt suffocated. It got bad, really bad. The mere thought of the things… things waiting to pounce and devour him like so many others before, things that had decimated an entire city into ash and ruin, monstrosities that would eat every part of his body and ravage him alive, paralyzed his body. In those moments, he dropped into a ball and burrowed his head into his arms, blocking his sight and allowing the boy to pretend like danger didn’t lurk around every corner. His breathing became rough and erratic, his chest rose in and out fast, and his sobs were muffled in his arms’ embrace.

He wasn’t past that yet, but he now at least found comfort in the light. However, the light also illuminated the lives that the night had taken, and it took many bigger beings than he.

The pale boy with his maroon t-shirt and blue jeans was walking with his head down, staring at the shifting, green undergrowth that slowly passed by. It was a lonely walk, and he staggered along, feet dragging into the dirt, at least until his eyes rested on something that wasn’t green and lively.

A brown, mangled corpse lay at his feet unmoving - a bear, or what had been one. Half of it was gone and ravaged. Grotesque intestines and other pinkish horrors spilled out of the bear’s stomach, which was completely open to the world and the boy’s widening eyes. Insects gladly hurried into and around the bear, feasting on its remains. Just the bear’s torso alone could easily fit three of him, and yet it was here – left for dead and violated. The boy reluctantly approached it. Its eyes were black with a mix of orange and had lost their liveliness, but they held the bear’s last expression. The dark eyes were opened too much. Almost as if the fearsome beast was scared.

Landmarks were scarce and hard to recognize in the forest, but they were there, usually in the form of a peculiar hill or stone outing. With the boy’s spotting and the guidance of the sun in the east, he hadn’t lost his direction. And he knew he was nearing his goal. He had to be, otherwise, this time, the night would surely take him.

As the sun began to fall and the light began to disappear, the boy kept his eyes searching for both the cabin and danger. He had been lucky so far. Gradually, the woods became more and more familiar. He recognized groups of bushes and plants and trees for what they were: the surroundings of the cabin.

And then he saw it. In all its glory, the wooden cabin remained untouched by the savages of the world. It was masked by tall brown trees, hidden away in a lonely meadow. Its walls seemed impenetrable, its roof pierced the sky, and it called the boy with a sense of homeliness.

The boy hobbled over to the cabin door. He was ridden with small cuts and bruises and smears of dirt, and he was heavily exerted, but he had made it. As he opened the door just enough for him to pass through, the cool, friendly air of the cabin washed over him, opening to a spacious interior. His body was worn through, and it finally caught up with him. The beige couch had never seemed so inviting before, and the boy collapsed onto it, shoes on and all.

**Chapter 2: The Cabin**

The boy woke with a start, his brown hair was wild and outwards and his eyes soft and dull. He scanned his surroundings while he breathed erratically. He felt like he was in danger, like he was back in the forest, like he was in the city; but he wasn’t in danger. Not anymore. He was safe, or so he thought until loud noises came from the back of the cabin. It was a discordant mix of clattering and clanging like a raccoon was pillaging a dumpster and throwing its findings around.

Warily, the boy approached, navigating down a tight hallway toward the sounds. As he reached the entrance into the noisy room, he slowly peeked his head around and found a creature pillaging what was the pantry. The boy sneaked closer, hiding behind a table, to study it. It was not a creature but a blonde-haired boy, not much older than him, who was feasting upon the canned delights in the pantry with his hands and no regard for manners. He looked almost as dirty as the boy with brown hair, various smears of sauce riddling the blonde’s face, and a few splotches on his arms too. He wore a black T-shirt, and grey sweatpants.

The boy widened his eyes, the blonde still oblivious, and in reflex gasped at the sight. The blonde reeled back, hitting his head on a shelf in the pantry, and screamed much too highly, causing the brown-haired boy to wince. And then the blonde cursed three times before he closed his eyes shut, scared to see what monstrosity had let out that ghastly sound. His tan face and blonde hair made the boy think of a surfer.

“O’ Ghost! Leave me alone, please!” The blonde boy cried out, prostrating with his head down. “Don’t eat me! I am a thirteen-year-old boy. I am not tasty. I would know. I have much of my life to live and breathe and not be… possessed.” The blonde was silent for a few moments. “Not that it would be bad to get,” he swallowed, “possessed or devoured by a great being like you! No, of course not.” He awkwardly trailed off, waiting for a response.

The brown-haired boy, thought to be a ghostly monstrosity, was at first a bit appalled and taken back, but after a short moment, he smiled and walked up close to the blonde so that the groveling, shaking boy was right at his feet, and then he patted the boy’s hair, who flinched at the touch.

“Hello,” the brown-haired boy said. “What are you doing in my cabin?”

The two boys had settled now. They were in the living room with many beige couches, and each of the boys was sitting on their own.

“So,” the blonde said, shifting awkwardly in place.

“So,” the brown-haired boy echoed.

“I didn’t know it was your place, I swear! I – “

“I’m not mad at all,” the brown-haired affirmed, holding a slight smile. “I really don’t mind.”

The blonde’s eyes widened. “Really? So, can I stay here?” he said, hopping off the couch and beaming at the nonchalant cabin owner.

“Sure, why not?” The boy shrugged.

“Just to be sure – “

“Yes,” the boy said resolutely, “you can stay.” The blonde pumped his fist in excitement.

“Thank you! What’s your name?” The blonde asked, sitting down next to the brown-haired on the couch. The blonde was much smaller than the brown-haired.fi

“Valentino, call me Valen,” he said. “And you?”

“Lancey,” The blonde boy smiled. “Can we go back and eat some more?”

Not long after, the two were eating at the brown, wooden dining table between the kitchen and living room.

“I’ve been in and out of the foster system.” Lancey said, his hands foraging in a can of green beans and eating them. “No one really took me on for long, and my current guardians hardly cared about me. As soon as everything started, I left. I don’t know much, but I was just stumbling around away from those crazies,” Lancey was trying to talk while shoving piles of food down his throat, “and then I found your super nice cabin and have been here for about a night or two.” He burped loudly, rubbing his stomach and sitting among a mess of empty cans. “That’s it.”

“Same,” Valen was also eating his share, though not nearly as clumsily or as much; and Valen, unlike Lancey, ate with utensils and plates. “This was my family’s cabin.” He looked up at the brown ceiling.

“Where are they now?” Lancey asked innocently, but then eyes his opened wide as Lancey didn’t respond. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Valen stared at the floor for a moment or two. It was hard for him to talk to people, especially after what had happened. He glanced at the pantry. There were still many cans left, but he was already worried about what would happen when the food ran out, or if a monster came and easily slaughtered them, which he believed was very much in their power, recalling the bear’s gruesome remains and what had happened at the city with his... They had told him to run and wait at the cabin for them. Valen didn’t know if they were alive.

“Lancey, we have work to do,” Valen said. “To survive.”

Lancey met Valen’s eyes. “I know, believe it.”

The two immediately began to assemble the vague beginnings of a simple plan. Valen realized that regardless of how scared he was of the outside world, information was important; and staying inside and cooped up would only be a temporary solution, after which they would have to stumble upon the new world completely blind.

So, the boys spent the rest of the day bashing their minds together, Valen pacing around the living room and Lancey around his mountain of cans, both offering their opinions and thoughts and jokes. They grew more familiar with one another. Eventually, after much of the day had passed, they concluded that they needed to stay under the radar, lest one of the monsters come, investigate, find a better food and water solution, and increase the defensive capabilities of the fort and themselves.

They ransacked through the cabin, which had a small upstairs, a main floor, and a large basement, for anything useful. There was a set of kitchen knives, of which Lancey found a machete the most appealing; a shed right behind the cabin with pliers, rakes, shovels, a lawnmower even, and a bunch of other assortments; a tiny office area with a computer, paper, pencils, and a printer in the basement. There was plenty, and it was up to them to put it to use, but night had come.

Valen was older than Lancey by around two years, so Valen took the bigger bed while Lancey took the smaller bed in the upstairs bedroom. That night was harder for Valen to fall asleep on, regardless of the soft bed. Frightening roars, some close and some far, pierced into the cabin like they had enough power to shatter it all completely. At other times, he heard heavy stomps much too close for comfort, causing the cabin to tremble and leaving Valen unsettled.

When it came to it, Valen turned to what he always did: his family. He focused on them. The smell of his mother’s cooking, the witty remarks of his brother, his younger sister trailing him, and his father happily talking. Valen’s surroundings drowned out as his memory overpowered, and soon he fell asleep.

**Chapter 3: Times in the Woods**

It was the next morning. Valen and Lancey had already eaten and had been preparing to go outside. Lancey held his machete in his hand along with a backpack full of bottled water and cans as well as a lighter had found. Valen held a rake that he reformed into a spear and had a backpack of his own.

The two walked through the cabin door, Valen locking it on his way out with a key and headed off into the direction opposite of the city. Valen wasn’t too familiar with the area. He only remembered a few landmarks that were filled with the memories of his childhood; so even heading out into the forest was dangerous, but they had to do it. It was unavoidable.

As they traversed in the constant direction, Lancey marked trees with his machete, leaving a trail of signs leading back to their cabin. They moved silently and without speech, always scanning their surroundings. The air felt light, and the sun illuminated most things. But the forest had changed. They did not hear any animals or humans, but worse creatures instead.

The sun was directly above them, leaking through the canvas of trees. They had been traveling for around an hour. The silence of the forest was unsettling and eerie, and the boys had always been on guard. That was why the moment that Lancey stopped still in his tracks, Valen knew something was wrong.

Suddenly, Lancey turned and sprinted towards Valen, who had been a step behind him, and grabbed his arm. “Run!” He yelled urgently; his face struck with a panicked look. Valen didn’t question it and dashed with him away from whatever he had spotted.

It wasn’t long until he found out. A beast the size of a bulldozer raced after them. It had ten legs, each like a long scythe, and was built of a combination of black fur and some sort of reflective material that looked like stone. It had two huge pitch-black eyes and a massive body that bent upwards like a walking squid. It snarled as it precisely coordinated its many legs to move, revealing a frightening mouth with hundreds of teeth.

It was not the first monster he had seen, but that did not calm him one bit. It mowed down trees, logs, and bushes that the boys had had to avoid. For now, it was far away, but Valen recognized that it would soon catch up.

“Don’t just stare at it!” Lancey panted, looking back at Valen in stride. “Keep moving!” Valen grimaced under the strain. He dropped his backpack onto the ground and bolted forward. The monster paid the backpack no heed and kept ferociously pursuing them. The boys ran through bushes and down hills and over fallen trees, but whatever they did wasn’t enough.

“We have to do something,” Valen gasped, barely getting the words out and running as fast as he could. He wasn’t sure how long he could maintain this speed. They had already been running for a minute, and the beast was getting closer and closer.

“To the Cabin!” Lancey yelled out, not turning back. Lancey was surprisingly fast and pulled away from Valen.

“We won’t make it!” Valen said. Lancey didn’t respond. They both were sprinting with all their might. Valen kept pushing himself as much as he could, but then his foot clipped a large root, sending him coursing onto the ground and rolling. Valen scrambled up to his feet, but the beast was already on him. This was it. This was Valen’s end. The ten-legged monstrosity headed straight for Valen and picked one of its bladed legs off the ground; and then the beast reared it back, preparing to slice off Valen’s head straight. Valen didn’t move and closed his eyes shut. “Go, Lancey!” He shouted with finality, but the end didn’t come.

Instead, he heard footsteps to his right. He opened his eyes to pandemonium. Lancey came back, wielding his machete, and thrusted it into the side of the distracted monster that was trying to kill Valen; but the machete hardly went deep. The beast pulled back its slash at Valen and whipped one of its back legs into Lancey, sending him flying into a tree. He hit it with a loud thud and a pained cry. The monster angrily moved to finish Lancey off, scurrying towards him, until something hit its back.

A wooden spear bounced off the reflective armor of the beast but got its attention. Immediately after, Valen was picking up rocks and branches off the ground, throwing them too at the beast, and then hollering at it. After a few throws and seconds, the beast finally forsook going to finish Lancey and madly turned toward Valen, whose eyes widened in response. He sprinted away with the beast in close pursuit. It wouldn’t take long for it to catch up again, and Valen’s mind was scrambling to find something – anything that would allow him to survive.

Hide? He couldn’t. Not this close to Lancey. If he hid, the beast would just turn back and kill Lancey. He had to lure it away for as long as possible and then… he didn’t know what would happen. His lungs burned.

The whole ordeal was foolish. They shouldn’t have gone out. Valen knew what was happening outside. He saw what happened in the city, yet he still went out, and now Lancey was paying the price. Valen made the wrong decision. There was no defending against the monsters. There was running and escaping and hiding, but he shouldn’t have thought himself able to defend and have the luxury of exploration. That would be impossible. Tears formed at the corners of Valen’s eyes, flying off him as he was sprinting.

He took a deep breath. At least outside, there was a chance, he thought. Staying inside the cabin was waiting for death, one way or another. Valen didn’t want to do that. Not like his family… but maybe they were still alive. He wiped away his tears with his hand, but they still flowed. He knew that they probably weren’t.

Valen ran and lost track of time. All he knew was that he felt like he was burning alive with each passing second. Soon, his movement wasn’t even a sprint anymore, nor a jog. It was a mess of flailing limbs and a vain boy. Valen was midway through a grass clearing. The beast caught up but was only a few yards into the meadow. Valen was sprawled on the grass, still slowly crawling away. At this point, he was in-and-out of consciousness. He felt his mind slipping away, and no matter how much he wanted to live and stay awake, his body wouldn’t respond. It couldn’t.

As his consciousness succumbed, in the corner of his vision, he saw the beast reel back as a trail of explosions suddenly hit it. Cascades of orange fire burst upon the beast, who let out a harrowing roar and entered a maniacal frenzy. Grenades and hundreds of bullets swarmed into it at once. None of them took care of it, and it still stood with only a few knicks in its reflective armor. It seemed like a long battle was ahead, but his vision soon became black, and he lost consciousness.

Valen woke in the embrace of soft grass. The sky was a dark blue, but the sun wasn’t completely gone yet.

“54 people,” A feminine voice said from his right. “That’s how many died to ward that thing off.” Valen turned over, his sore body aching, to find an Asian woman that looked to be in her high thirties. She had long, silky black hair that was tied behind her head and a beige military uniform outfitted with magazines in her pockets and grenades on her belt. She carried a fearsome rifle in her hands. Her brown eyes investigated Valen’s steadily. “They died for you. I hope you don’t forget their sacrifice.”

Only after studying her did he come to his senses. He was still in the meadow, but it was war-torn now and hardly as beautiful as it was. Small craters and splatches of dirt replaced the pure field of green. Bodies in beige camouflage lay all around him. Pools of blood spilled over blades of grass. Dismembered body parts, no doubt cut by the vicious scythe-legs, were all over. Valen paled, breathing heavily, and slowly rose. He cast his eyes downward, and his body shuddered, clearly shaken up. Someone bumped into him.

“He’s awake,” a muscular, tall man said, glaring down into Valen’s eyes. He had a buzz cut, and, like the woman, was from the military. His skin was bronze, and he had bushy, black eyebrows. There were more people a dozen yards away also in the military.

“I already talked to him, Gomez,” the Asian woman said.

“Aye, Captain,” Gomez answered. Valen saw his huge back as he walked towards the captain, but not without another glare towards him. It was Valen’s fault. Valen got Gomez’s comrades killed. He stared at the ground.

“There are thirty of us now,” the captain said, “but there wasn’t a better way for them to go out saving like that. Nothing we can do but keep going.” She put her hand on Gomez’s shoulder. He grunted. The two talked more for a while, but Valen tuned it out. He stared at the torn remains. The result of his actions. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes. Was his family like that? Was Lancey like that?

“Lancey. Lancey!” Valen said. “A kid in the forest! He’s still there!” Valen approached Gomez and the captain.

“We just saved you and now you want more of us to die for you?” Gomez said, turning back to Valen and pointing his finger at him.

“He saved me too! I-I know where he is,” Valen cried, his eyes glassy. “He’s injured!”

“You - “

“Gomez,” the captain warned, and then looked at Valen, who still had tears streaming down his face. “Where?”

Valen wiped his tears away and pointed. “I know the way.”

The captain sighed. All the soldiers that were left were treating the wounded and recovering from the battle. “We’ll separate. Gomez, you’re with me,” she ordered, then faced the rest of her command. “John!” She yelled. A calm man looked up from outside a beige tent. “You’re in command! Move the camp a mile north! I’ll be back in…” she turned to Valen and asked, “How long?”

“An hour at most,” Valen said. He wasn’t sure how long he had been running, but there was a physical limit to how long he had been escaping the beast. An hour for a round trip, and to make sure they found Lancey.

She nodded in understanding, then yelled out towards John again, “An hour!” The three set off with Valen in the lead, but not before the captain got a stretcher. The two adults, carrying the stretcher, matched Valen’s slow pace. It was the fastest he could muster, though. He was extremely sore and had much shorter legs. He was barely able to keep standing.

Gomez was next to the captain, and many times Valen heard Gomez offer his disagreements with the situation, but he ignored it and kept moving. He recognized the paths he took and led them straight back on it. It was much easier to follow back where they came from because of the wake left by the monster. Trampled bushes and fallen trees left an almost clear and completely straight path back.

Not long after, they reached the spot where Lancey had been. He was still there, but he was motionless. His body was still and face up. His eyes were closed, and his blonde hair fell still on his face. Valen rushed towards him and lightly pushed him side-to-side.

“Lancey,” Valen whispered in his ear. “Help’s here.” Lancey’s body rocked back and forth. Nothing happened. “Wake up.” Valen’s savior didn’t move. “Come on, Lancey.” Valen wasn’t sure if he was imagining it, but a small sound seemed to have escaped Lancey. A small noise like a soft gasp. Valen quickly put his ear up to Lancey’s mouth.

“… stop moving me around,” Lancey said softly, grimacing in pain. Valen broke into a smile and backed away, letting the two adults approach him. Wordlessly, they set the stretcher on the ground and brought Lancey onto it.

“Other people?” Lancey muttered. “Thank you…Valen,” He trailed off as he lost consciousness again. Valen didn’t know if Lancey was sleeping, or his injury was just that bad. The walk back was uneventful. The sun was beginning to set when they arrived back at the meadow. The dead were still there. Then they moved to where the camp was a mile away. The sky glowed a soft pink, and streaks of clouds spotted it beautifully.

As they moved, the captain, whose name Valen had found out to be Amelia Kang, explained that the monsters would likely move to feast on the remains there, which is why they had vacated it so fast. She also told him that they were the National Guard, or what was left of it. Apparently, they had only survived by hiding as much as they could, and, originally, they were part of a much larger troop. She told Valen that they tried to fight the monsters at first. Anything was possible if you threw enough bodies at it. After she said that, it was silent the rest of the way, even Gomez too.

The camp was amid tall oak trees. There was a single medical, beige tent. There were no fires. Everyone focused on staying as quiet as possible. There were two people on guard, hiding among bushes and the like. When Valen arrived with Lancey, Gomez, and the captain, they brought him to John, the man left in charge of the camp, who was their medic.

“It’s hard for me to diagnose him like this,” John said, analyzing Lancey on a cot. Right before, he had asked Lancey a few questions about how he felt. “But I think he at least fractured a bone in his spine.” John had white, pale skin, greying black hair, and rectangular glasses. He looked at the captain. “He’s not going to be able to walk for a while and must deal with a tremendous amount of pain. I’m talking for months. And I’m not sure if he needs surgery, I’d need an X-Ray for that, but I can make some sort of brace, maybe, if I have the right people and materials.”

The captain paused in thought, then nodded. “I’ll get you some,” she said. “We’ll talk more later.”

“Captain, can I talk to you?” Gomez asked. He had been in the corner of the tent, listening to the conversation. The captain walked out of the tent and Gomez followed. They were right outside, so it wasn’t hard for Valen to listen in from inside the tent. It was like Gomez didn’t even try to hide what he was saying. “He’s dead weight. Can’t walk. Can’t do anything.” Gomez muffled voice came through. “We don’t have that type of luxury.”

“He’s a kid,” the captain said. “We protect him. What else did we join the military for?”

“My entire squad died. Thousands of our division died and we’re about all that’s left. Hundreds of thousands of people in the city. Who knows how much in the country? In the world? You have to face it. The kid, Lancey, and even the other one will take lives to save. Lives that we don’t have.” Valen didn’t hear anything for a moment or two. “I can’t have more friends die because of people they never met,” Gomez said quietly.

“What do you want me to do?” Captain Kang asked, her voice rising. “Leave them to die? We are with them, for better or worse. I will not abandon anyone, just like how I won’t ever abandon you.”

“Alright, Captain,” Gomez backed off, “but don’t forget what I said. The world has changed. We need to with it, or we won’t even make it to the capital.” Valen heard his footsteps receding from the tent. The captain sighed. John was busy tending to another wounded soldier. Valen took one last look at Laney, who was unconscious, and the tent suddenly seemed completely silent and empty; and the world too. Everything became simple and mundane and grey and quiet. And everything pained Valen’s heart.

Valen was standing next to Lancey, who was sleeping, when a violent pain suddenly assaulted his mind. It felt like someone stuck a sharp needle into his head. He groaned softly. And then, after about a minute, it went away like it was never there. Valen didn’t pay it any mind; for maybe it was a sign for him to get some much-needed sleep.

Apparently, the soldiers had survived this long by using a drone. That was how they found and got to Valen. They said it had a battery that could last for days, and could charge using solar energy, but no doubt, it wouldn’t last much longer without conservation. It had been three days since the fall of the city. They were packing up the tents bright and early. The sun scorched heavy onto Valen’s brown eyes through the trees.

Soldiers busily moved around as quietly as possible, loading new magazines, counting what ammo they had left. They had to save what they had, which was why the drone was coming in so useful for both navigation and avoiding.

In the morning, John had told Valen that there was another group of civilians in a tent, and that he should stay with them. He didn’t. He wanted to help the soldiers.

Valen saw Captain Kang, who was carrying dark green ammo crates. They were about the same height. Captain Kang noticed Valen approaching and set the crates down.

“Thank you,” Valen said, firmly locking eyes with the captain. “For everything.”

“No problem,” she evenly replied.

“Lancey and I were at my cabin. It has canned food and tools and whatever else you guys can find.”

“How far?” Kang asked.

“Two or three hours,” Valen responded. “What happened to Cleveland? Is that where your group came from? My family’s there.”

“Sorry, Valen. It’s destroyed. Gone,” she said. Valen’s eyes darkened. Kang continued, “Nothing left. All buildings higher than two stories are demolished. No human is there anymore, or anything earthly,” she paused, studying Valen who looked to be dreary. “Come with me.” The captain led him to a circle of people sitting on small crates of ammunition and grenades. Gomez was there, so was John and another person Valen didn’t recognize.

“You know John and Gomez,” she motioned to them. “This one,” she patted the helmet of a young man with dark skin, “is our drone operator, William.” He held a large tablet in one of his hands and offered the other to Valen in a handshake. Valen shook it. He didn’t feel like talking to people, but he came with the captain anyway.

“William, pull out your map,” the captain ordered, and William followed; and then she turned to Valen. “Where did you say that cabin was?” She pointed at a spot on the map that William gave her. “This is us,” she said, and then moved her hand to the left. “This is the city.” She handed the map over to Valen.

“It doesn’t have much food,” Valen said. “Only around a day or two’s worth.”

“Animals are gone. Foraging isn’t a good enough source. Drone’s power needs to be conserved,” she stared at Valen. “I’ll just check if it’s on the way. If not, then we won’t go.”

“On the way to where?” Valen asked.

“The capital, Washington,” Gomez answered. He was sharpening a large knife while sitting on an ammo crate. “We got an order through our radios right before it cut out for everyone to try to make it to the capital.” So, there was somewhere safe. Valen studied the map in his hand and the two spots the captain located. He recognized a highway his family used to take to the cabin. His family. He paused. The captain lightly tapped his shoulder.

“You okay, kid?” Kang asked.

“Yeah,” Valen affirmed. Using the highway that he found, he located where the cabin was. It was between their current position and the city, but slightly closer to where they were.

He pointed at the spot and handed it to William. “The cabin,” Valen clarified.

“We’d have to backtrack,” William said, tilting the paper map towards Captain Kang. “It’s not worth it. We’re better off heading towards the front lines and picking up what we find on the way.”

“Alright,” the captain said. “Get me a route and let me know when you’re ready.” Ten minutes later, they were. The large troop marched quietly in a straight line, scared of what they might attract if they were too loud. After the first hour, they took a break for William to scout the area head on his tablet and large camouflage drone. It seemed like this was routine.

Valen was placed with the few other civilians, who he hadn’t interacted with so far. There was a married couple, and three other people on their own. While the soldiers carried rifles and explosives, they were carrying supplies: food, water, ammunition, the tents, and other reserves, but Valen and a fifty-year-old man were carrying Lancey’s stretcher. Even though Lancey wasn’t moving himself, the stretcher rocked back-and-forth with every step, causing him to wince in pain and curse.

“Thank you both and all, but can you try to walk more… still with every step?” Lancey said.

Valen smiled. “Be quiet, patient,” he said. The tall man that was helping to carry Lancey with Valen had long, tied-back, brown hair and a pair of black sunglasses on. His name was Frank, and he looked like he came straight out of a rock concert. Frank chuckled.

“This isn’t some sort of game,” a voice said from behind them. It was Gomez. “Stay quiet and stay moving.” He walked past them, looking ahead.

“Party pooper,” Lancey muttered. Soon, they hit the large highway William was aiming for to start their route. It had about twelve lanes, all freshly painted with lines, and was separated halfway in the middle by a concrete barrier. Seeing the interstate without any moving cars on it made Valen feel odd. It was so different, void and eerily empty, from what it should be. Everything was so different. There were few cars on it, completely still and evacuated; but some of them even looked like crumpled paper, obliterated, likely due to an unfortunate encounter. It seemed not many people were able to try and escape by vehicle.

The group couldn’t travel on it, not when it was in the open, nor could they risk driving on it; but they could walk alongside it, a bit into the trees and cover. Eventually, this way, they had to come across food and towns, which was currently their only plan for obtaining food and supplies.

They had been walking for four hours. Clouds covered the sky, hiding the sun and leaving the world in a pale murkiness. Lush trees of many types - yellows, dark greens, whites, and pinks - flourishing in the time of Spring, reached up into the sky. Numerous tall trunks stood imposing along the sides of the highways, shielding the party from most views.

Ahead, an exit branched off from the highway, and somewhere up in the front, the leaders of the group, primarily Kang but also Gomez, John, and William, decided to follow it after a short meeting. Valen was still with the other civilians. He remembered what Gomez told Captain Kang last night. How he was baggage that would only cause more deaths. He tightened his hands around the handle of Lancey’s stretcher. He didn’t want to be useless; he wanted the opposite.

The exit led to a large gas station. It looked like a tiny shopping center and had the signs of many familiar food companies on the outside walls. It would have been even more glamorous if half of it wasn’t caved in like something stepped on it. The group paused with the rest stop far in their sight for William to clear the area first before entering. William was invaluable, saving practically everyone’s lives through his scouting. They had changed course or stopped twice in the woods south of the highway to avoid crossing the path of a terrible beast that William had seen. 54 people had died to save Valen. He didn’t forget, and he knew how many more lives would be taken if they ran into another.

William’s camouflage drone was only a small spot in the Valen’s vision. It came back and William confirmed that it was safe, so the group broke from the woods and into the open, hungry for food and rest. Valen himself was in the snacks section of the station. He was trying to find his favorite, what he and his family always enjoyed.

It was brownish-red, tall, and skinny. Hidden in a white wrapping, it was a jerky stick. Eagerly, he grabbed a handful of them and stuffed them in his pockets; and then he took another and unwrapped it. An enticing smell immediately hit his nose like a thousand luxurious spices. His eyes lit and he pounced on it. The jerky stick was about eight inches long, but it was about to be gone in three bites. He was licking his lips and about to take his last bite on the remaining inch when he heard a clutter to his left.

It was Gomez, who was also looking at some jerky. Not wanting a confrontation, Valen immediately tried to walk out, but unfortunately, Valen’s eyes and Gomez’s met, and then Gomez looked down at the food he was holding in his hand.

“Good choice,” Gomez said and then turned back to select his own jerky.

Valen stopped in his tracks and blinked. “Thank you,” he said awkwardly after a short pause. He and Gomez got their fill of snacks before the rest of the group laid claim to it. Who knew if they would ever be made again? Valen ate the last bite of the jerky stick, savoring the splendid texture. Flavors burst in his mouth and gave him a shuddering, sweet sensation.

Of course, snacks weren’t all he was getting, but the rest of the group was handling the necessities right now; hauling bottled water into their military backpacks as well as any food they found, especially non-perishables. Valen was next to Lancey right now, preparing to leave with the group.

“Did you get a snack for me?” Lancey asked innocently, making his blue eyes pop as he spoke. He looked like a puppy.

Valen stared at him and then coughed. “Yeah,” he said and pulled out a specific nacho-cheese-flavored bag of chips.

“Thank you!” Lancey exclaimed, stuffing the orange chips into his mouth one after another. That was supposed to be for later, thought Valen as he watched it all disappear. Everyone had about finished resupplying. John had been working with another soldier who was particularly good with craft on Lancey’s brace. It looked to be around noon, but it was hard to exactly determine where the sun was behind the wall of clouds, which had not begun to clear up in the slightest. And then the group began to walk again.

Three days passed by. They had been in Pennsylvania for a while now. They had seen the welcome sign on the road they took. They had switched highways a couple of times, but thanks to William, they hadn’t had any dangerous encounters so far.

Valen had received the same piercing headache on each day, and for each, it would quickly disappear again. It had too much of a pattern to be disregarded, so Valen asked John about it, but he had no clue. Pittsburgh wasn’t that far from them, and now they were in a sort of suburban area. Although it wasn’t downtown yet, ruin and despair labeled every building. Many houses were decimated, flattened, or squashed under the monstrosities, but some remained untouched. Large divots and cracks were dispersed all over the roads, spreading through the pavement like a web.

William had droned ahead, so they were walking straight down a street. The reason they entered the suburbs was to look for more food and water, especially in a grocery store. The light sounds of their collective footsteps echoed through the streets of demolished houses. The sky was very different today and shined a beautiful blue. Round white clouds hung in it. The sun was easy, and the air was cool.

While Valen was walking, a headache came back like a hot knife was digging into his head. Valen carefully dropped his side of Lancey’s stretcher on the ground, and then reeled over, clutching the side of his head.

“Valen, what’s wrong?” Frank said, letting go of Lancey’s stretcher too, and coming over. He placed his hand on Valen’s back. Valen was turning wildly in all directions. It felt like someone was splitting his head open and messing around. He groaned.

“Something - ”

Valen yelped in pain as it unrelentingly continued. The group had stopped now, and the captain and John approached Valen.

“Valen, what’s wrong?” Kang asked.

“My… head,” he answered, trying to hold himself back from screaming out in pain.

“Is it the headaches you told me about?” John said, bending down to get a look at Valen’s face.

“Yes,” Valen said, gritting his teeth.

The captain was about to say something when the ground shook. Everyone turned their heads. A house covered in broken planks of wood and brick suddenly erupted, sending a flurry of housing pieces in every direction, and a ferocious beast revealed itself. It was massive, the size of two tanks on top of each other, and it looked like a giant rhino, except for the fact that it had four eyes and a protruding jaw like a bird’s beak. It had a large black horn with a terrifying, vicious, point at the end. It rushed towards the group. The captain cursed, but the military group was quick in responding.

“William! Get us some cars!” The captain yelled and then aimed her rifle at the beast. In unison, the military group fired their guns and grenades. One even shot a rocket at the grey monster. The monster was encased in a giant ball of orange fire and sparks, but then it moved right through it, seemingly unimpeded except for some small scratches, burns, and bumps. They couldn’t run away from it unless they left their wounded. Captain Kang wouldn’t leave anyone behind, and neither would Valen; so, their options were to either fight it or escape with everyone.

“I need time!” William shouted back. He searched his surroundings for vehicles. Just like how there were some untouched houses, there had to be vehicles. He called out to other people who also knew how to hotwire a vehicle, a mere three, and then they separated into the streets, each to find their own. The rest were keeping the monster busy, which was an extremely difficult task. There was no use prioritizing damaging the beast, so what they focused on was buying time and avoiding its attacks. The disciplined militants covered for each other and skillfully dodged the monster’s charges and snaps. They were lucky that it seemed to only have a single brute method for attacking, but it didn’t mean that all were able to escape.

The monster was able to move at frightening speeds, and a soldier, whose name Valen didn’t know but had seen before, disappeared into its mouth in a blurred flash of blood. He was swallowed whole. Only a few seconds later and in one fluid motion, the monster chomped a female soldier in two and then impaled another to its right on its dark horn before throwing him high into the air. The soldier screamed as he entered the beast’s horrifying maw.

Valen knew he was no help to the soldiers. He could only hope they would hang on, for he had no gun or other weapon. Not to mention, Lancey couldn’t move; his injury prevented it. He was on the stretcher, watching the ordeal in panic. Pulling Lancey away to safety was something Valen could do. Valen sprinted towards the still Lancey, passing the back ranks of the firing and weaving soldiers.

Not wasting any time, he lifted one side of the stretcher, letting the other drag on the ground, and backpedaled away from the chaotic fight. He set Lancey behind the ruins of a decently far away house, and then turned to go back to the monster. While he didn’t think that he would be much help, any assistance was better than none, and all their lives hung on the soldiers’ fate; not to mention they had saved his life. So many had died for him, and he hadn’t even begun to make up for it.

“Hey,” Lancey said, laying flat on the stretcher. He wasn’t looking at Lancey. “Don’t die.”

“I won’t,” He promised, giving Lancey one last look before running back to the battlefield.

For the situation, the soldiers were surprisingly calm. Gomez held a stern expression on his face as he unloaded magazine after magazine onto the rhino in an unending fury. Whether it was on purpose or not Valen did not know, but one of his bullets struck the beast’s eye, but not all the way through. The bronze bullet was stuck in the eye like a splinter, glinting in the sun’s light. Immediately after, the beast roared so loud that Valen had to cover his ears, and some of the soldiers particularly close to it fell back. The beast began to rampage. The soldiers in its proximity had barely started to recover when it snapped at them. In a single moment, five of them were disposed of.

Valen noticed an unused black rifle on the road. The beast wasn’t close to it. He dashed towards it and picked it up. He had never used one before, and everything seemed foreign, but when it came to it, he remembered the words *point and shoot*. He aimed at the beast.

“Put that down,” Captain Kang said a few yards to his right, holding a green rocket launcher. “You’re more of a danger to us than to the beast.”

Valen furrowed his eyebrows. “I can – “

“You can’t,” Gomez said between his constant shooting. “Listen to her. It isn’t a toy.”

“Go help John with the wounded,” Kang said evenly.

Valen scowled, but he listened. John had been pulling the wounded, the few that the beast left, out of the fight along with Frank. Valen didn’t know where the rest of the civilians were, probably hiding behind the destruction. He quickly joined John and Frank. They had been taking all the wounded further down the street from the beast. John was next to a soldier whose leg was… gone from the shin down. He was screaming wildly as John wrapped a cloth around the soldier’s leg. John noticed him approaching.

“Take this!” He said urgently, taking Valen’s hands and placing them on the wrapped cloth. ”Tie it tight!” He said as he went towards another injured soldier. Valen fumbled with it but then secured it tightly, causing the soldier to yell in pain.

“Sorry,” Valen said, paling and wincing at the soldier’s plight. Valen looked up at John, who was going from soldier to soldier trying to do all he could, but there wasn’t much that he could do. He was low on supplies, painkillers, everything. Frank dragged another injured soldier over to them and then turned back to save more out of the fight.

Valen rushed towards the hurt man, for John was busy. He approached him. The man wasn’t moving. Valen caught his breath and then yelled out for John. Valen stared at his face. His eyes were open and brown, but their spark was gone. A deep wound went in his chest and dark red blood was gushing out. His beige uniform was stained with the color of her blood. John arrived and put two fingers on his neck. After a moment, he met Valen’s eyes. John’s face was pained.

“Dead,” John said while leaving to resume treatment of another. Valen took a long look and then pulled away to help more. The fight kept going on like that. Valen could only deal with the aftermath of the beast and not fight it. He could only watch more people get hurt for him. Like his family did. Like the soldiers did before when they saved him. And then Captain Kang’s cold body was dragged out by Frank. He didn’t know she was dead. His job was only to pull people out. But Valen knew. Her black hair was still, and her face had lost all its color. She was gone. And her death was far from peaceful.

Kang’s left arm was completely torn off, taken by the ravaging beast. Valen slowly ran his fingers over her eyes, closing them, and then stood over her. His hands curled into a fist and his vision blurred red. He wanted to kill it. To completely pummel it. To torture it and make it feel what so many others had. It was out of his power, he knew, but he turned towards the beast with a murderous gaze. He breathed rapidly. The beast smashed through a light post in pursuit of yet another human.

He wanted no more of this. He sprinted towards another weapon, picking up a rifle from the ground in stride, and dashed to the beast. There were about sixteen soldiers left and they were furiously shooting and dodging in honor of their captain. Valen soon arrived. He brought the scope to his eyes and aimed for the beast. He pulled the trigger and didn’t let go, crying softly as the bullets flew. Initially, his body reeled back from the recoil, but he quickly stabilized himself before he ran out of ammunition in the magazine.

“Valen! Back off!” Gomez yelled over Valen’s gunfire. Valen steadily looked back at him from the corners of his eyes, stained with the remnants of small tears. Gomez’s eyes widened, and then gradually went back to normal as he understood what Valen was feeling, what he was trying to do. He tossed Valen a magazine. “Three rules. Stay alive, don’t shoot at all if there is any chance you might hit one of us, and don’t waste ammo like that.”

Valen nodded. The rifle seemed simple enough. There was a button on the side for reloading, the lever for cocking, and pull the trigger to kill. The beast had turned his way after he shot at it, but another soldier had shot right after, getting its attention again. That soldier was currently running from the towering beast. It was at least triple the man’s height.

Valen repositioned. He needed a good angle, so he could get it where Gomez did that one time, in the eyes. It had four of them, so hopefully, it wouldn’t be too difficult. Valen aimed towards one of the beast’s eyes. He pulled the trigger once, unleashing a bullet that whisked in the air and wildly missed its mark. He couldn’t hit a moving, primal beast, he realized, not without the training that the soldiers had. To make his shots, he needed to be much closer. He prepared to sprint towards the monster.

“Don’t! Calm down!” Gomez shouted at him. “We are buying time for William! Not trying to kill it!” Gomez was right. Valen took a deep breath. He needed to delay it, not try to injure it, if that was even possible anyway. Valen fired two shots at the beast. This time, he aimed to simply hit its humongous body, rather than its relatively small eyes. His shots bounced off the beast’s skin but successfully attracted its attention from the nearby soldiers who were trying to escape it.

But now, it turned towards him, annoyed like they were pests to be removed. The beast galloped with its horn reflecting the blinding sun and pattered with the gunfire of the other soldiers. Valen paled. What was he supposed to do now? He stared at the quickly approaching beast in shock. He snapped himself out of it and dashed towards his left, hoping that the beast couldn’t make a sudden, sharp turn while moving at its top speed. It could. It was almost right on him, its horn on course for his head. Valen, in his haste and instinct, dived forward under its legs. With any other normal, Earth-sized beast, this wouldn’t have worked, but with how big the monster was, it was much easier for him to sneak through.

Valen came out the other end mostly unscathed except for a few scrapes on his knees and elbows. The beast skidded to a stop, shaking its head and snorting, and then prepared to charge at him again before a grenade imploded against its skin. Another soldier saved him, and the cycle of baiting and making time continued. Against the scythe monster, this wouldn’t have worked; that one was much more fearsome, and this rhino-like beast did not have the terrifying bladed tentacles the other had, but it was impenetrable, and it could not be underestimated. A tense four minutes passed. Valen was currently shooting at the beast, supporting his partners, when he heard a loud sound behind him, like a car horn.

Valen glanced towards the source of the sound. Five cars were there, most of which were minivans and vans, which Valen figured was the type most used in the suburban area. They seemed to have just finished loading the wounded into a single car. They hadn’t brought the dead in; they didn’t have such a luxury. Gomez recognized the vehicles too. He gave the order to ease off fighting. The vehicles approached from behind them. One by one, the soldiers went into the cars while the rest would fend the beast off. Valen was one of the first. Gomez had ordered him in, and he himself was the last to be picked up.

The beast angrily charged after him, its horn wanting to consume more blood. A car swung around, opened a side door for Gomez, and then after a moment, sped away, winding through the suburban streets. Another car, which Valen was in, picked up Lancey, who was silent. Lancey could only listen to the gunshots, screaming, and yelling with his fate being determined with every noise. Valen wouldn’t wish that fate onto anyone. The cars were faster than the beast, not much faster but faster still, and they escaped back onto the street that they came into the area from. They had survived, but now they were only fifteen people left, half of their number the day before. The mood was solemn, and many things were left unsaid as the soldiers dealt with their own grief and the loss of the captain.

The citizens that hid weren’t found again. They likely left the entire area at some point, figuring that they would all die. The soldiers went into a nearby woods and set up the camp again. They weren’t going to move again for the rest of the day, for it was evening and they did not have the feeling for it; not to mention, the sky was already beginning to darken, and the sun was setting.

At some point, Gomez came up to Valen, who was next to Frank and Lancey on the bumpy floor of the forest.

“Don’t be that reckless again. That’s how you get killed.” Gomez said. He looked at Valen for a moment or two, observing, and then shook Valen’s shoulder. “But good job, kid. You did well. Would have made her proud.” He left after that. Valen didn’t fall asleep for a long while, remembering everything that was taken from him; he yearned for the power to make sure nothing else would be. He yearned for the power to protect.

It was noon the next day. The party of fifteen traveled using cars. They cut around Pittsburgh, not trying to find out what other horrors prowled in the city, and were able to avoid conflict again, for the hour they had been moving, due to William and his drone. They had stuck to gas stations and whatever outlying buildings they could find for gas and supplies. It was shaping up, for now.

Valen finally knew every member left by name now. There were the four people who had got the cars from the last fight: William, Maurice, Jennifer, and Nicholas. Frank, Lancey, and John. And then, under Gomez, were the remaining seven soldiers: Bryan, Hicks, Olivia, Xavier, Michael, Jake, and Gabe.

There wasn’t much talking. The only time people broke out of their sad shells was when they ate. In that, it seems, was the only remaining semblance of normalcy left. Now, they were eating at a fast-food place. They had ravaged through its frozen reserves and cooked them up on the stoves in its kitchen. Though they weren’t as savory as they were before everything, the burgers still tasted juicy.

“I missed this,” Gabe said, holding a large beef patty before his eyes, and there were another two sitting in his lap. He had pale white skin, glasses, and buzzed black hair. He also had quite a big frame. He groaned. “So good.”

“Looks like you’ve had that before,” Lancey said, watching Gabe eat with an eyebrow raised. Lancey was eating his own two as well.

“I so did,” Gabe confirmed, too caught up with the burger to refute and flicking a stray piece of the patty off the corner of his mouth. Lancey, Valen, and Frank were eating next to everyone now. In a sad way, their group was now too small to even separate into separate cliques while eating. It brought on a somber mood, and everyone was different than their usual, but the small talk was better than nothing.

“I’ve seen it,” Nicholas swallowed, his face full of mock horror, “and I’m straight traumatized by it. This guy,” he motioned to Gabe, who was smacking on his nice cheesy burger, “in his prime would eat piles and piles of this junk. Don’t know if what he ate ever came out of him. An all-devouring behemoth, ADB for short,” he chuckled. “Remember that nickname, Gabe?”

“Mm-hmm,” Gabe replied, chewing the remains of the burger, and then snorted. “Take me back to my prime, please!”

“He was like that ‘til I got him to enlist with me! Now he’s slightly better. Slightly,” Nicholas said, breaking out into a wide smile. Everyone laughed a bit, even Gabe. Nicholas had a country tan and brown hair that flowed behind his head to his shoulders, a mullet.

“Hey, you guys got your fun I got mine,” Gabe said, onto his second burger.

“You sure you got just fun on ya?” Nicholas laughed, looking Gabe up and down. Gabe playfully pushed him back.