

IMPORTANT READ ME!!!

Hello there if you are reading this thanks for taking the time to do so first of all.

Second of all this is a work in progress you have commenter abilities for a reason.

If you have questions, highlight the part and ask me through the comment.

This helps me a lot and would be really awesome if you would take the time to do so.

Also some of you have characters based on you in this story if you want me to change something or how they react tell me.

If it's not vital to the story I will work with you on it.

If you want a character email me personally and we can work on it.

ALSO everyone's doc moved here. I was doing separate ones but it was a pain to keep them all up to date.

Book One Title

Where The Rot Spreads

Book One of the Techrot
Saga

Chapter One

Chapter I: Ten Years Gone

Ash rained from the sky like snow, coating the ruins of what was once a strip mall. Broken neon signs sparked uselessly from rusted overhangs, and vines of black wire — pulsing with an unnatural, viral hum — coiled around crumbled storefronts like veins on a corpse.

Ten years since the virus made the world rot from the inside out.

TechRot hadn't just been a virus. It was a hunger — an infection that tore through circuits and screens, sprouting biomechanical limbs from anything with a motherboard. Drones with tendrils, vending machines with eyes. Tech turned beast. Cities became graveyards, and electricity meant death.

Now, the smart thing was to live in the dumbest places imaginable. Places where no signal could reach.

"Tell me why we're here again?" Robert's voice cut through the silence, half-sarcastic as he nudged open a rust-stained convenience store door with his shoulder. His makeshift dagger — little more than sharpened metal wrapped in cloth — was already in his hand. "Because, you know, nothing says *let's not die* like looting a TechRot hot zone."

Adam was already elbow-deep in a collapsed vending machine, goggles on, fingers twitching with excitement. "Because this baby still has a functional pressure coil. And pressure coils don't grow on trees." He tugged something out, shiny and hissing. "Also, because you're the looter and I'm the tinkerer. Teamwork, my guy."

"You say 'teamwork,' I hear 'bait.'"

In the distance, a soft, rhythmic clicking echoed — like claws on metal. Everyone froze.

A figure darted onto the roof two buildings over. Small. Fast.

"Scout's back," said Marianna, peering through her scope without needing to adjust it. "Jadrien's doing his weird roof-run thing again."

Sure enough, the boy vaulted from one structure to another, arms flailing for balance as he made his way back to the group.

"Yo!" Jadrien called as he landed with a thud beside them. "So, cool update — we're probably not alone out here. I saw a walker. Two legs. About yay tall." He gestured roughly to his chest. "Might be an old security bot that went full spaghetti."

"Did you throw anything at it?" Michael asked, stepping forward with a grunt. His riot shield was battered, his mace slung over his shoulder like a tired limb.

"I *may* have called it a tin can and flipped it off."

Michael rolled his eyes and muttered, "Remind me why we let him scout?"

"Because I'm *fast*, and I make danger fun." Jadrien grinned, only slightly out of breath.

As if on cue, a new voice cut in.

"You're all morons," said Marie flatly, arms crossed as she stood over a broken register. Her medical satchel was clinking softly at her hip. "If any of you get impaled again, I swear I'm going to let it fester."

She was already sorting antiseptic vials by color.

Azariah came skipping through the back entrance, tripping over the door frame and landing on her knees. "I *got* things!" she announced proudly, holding up a weathered box of canned peaches and what looked like a single, half-burned battery. "Also, some lady from Westend Camp says we still owe her two jars of fuel gel and a toothbrush."

Robert blinked. "Why a toothbrush?"

"I *may* have told her it belonged to a celebrity. It's a charisma thing."

Marianna snorted. "Your charisma's gonna get us killed one day."

From a shadowed shelf, a hand snuck out and snagged one of the cans Azariah had set down. "Finders, keepers," came Sage's voice — sly, sing-song, and echoing oddly.

"You weren't even in the room!" Azariah protested.

"I was in the *rafters*. That counts."

A loud *clang* interrupted the moment. Everyone turned. Adam stood, revolver in hand, ears twitching under his headphones. A red light blinked in the alley.

Movement.

"TechRot," he said quietly.

The temperature dropped.

Chapter Two

Chapter II: First Strike

The alley was dead silent. The kind of silence that warned of motion — the *wrong kind* of motion.

Adam's revolver was already out, his eyes locked on the blinking red light pulsing between a mound of collapsed metal crates. "It's a crawler," he muttered. "Low-grade TechRot. No eyes. Feels vibrations."

Robert immediately crouched. "So we whisper?"

"No," said Michael, stepping forward slowly. "We *don't* move."

"I *already* hate this plan," whispered Sage from the shadows. "Can't I just shank it while it's vibing?"

"It doesn't 'vibe,' Sage," Marianna replied dryly, rifle raised and scanning. "It *hunts*. It just does it slow."

A wet scraping noise dragged along the concrete — metal limbs dragging themselves over stone. Then it emerged from behind the crates.

The crawler looked like it had once been a generator. Now it moved on six twisted spider-like legs, its center a hissing mass of infected gears and what looked like melted plastic tubing. Its "face" was a steel plate, cracked down the middle, leaking oil like blood.

Its head snapped toward a falling can.

Clink.

The can hadn't come from any of them.

"Jadrien," Marie hissed.

"Okay, that one was on me," Jadrien whispered from above, crouched on a fire escape. "But hear me out — I have a plan."

"No plans. Just shut up," Marie said, pulling a small injector from her satchel and loading it. "Adam?"

"I'm working on it," Adam muttered, pulling a disc-shaped device from his toolbelt. "Shock lure. If I toss this right, it'll pulse and draw it away."

"You *sure*?" asked Robert.

“Nope.”

The crawler creaked. Its legs flexed.

Then it charged.

“NOW!” Michael shouted, launching forward, shield raised.

The crawler slammed into him, hard enough to send a metallic clang echoing through the alley. Michael dug his heels in, shield scraping the ground as he held the bot in place.

“MOVE!” he barked.

Marianna fired. The shot punched a hole straight through one of its legs, severing it clean. Sparks flew.

“Cover me!” Adam dashed to the side, ducking behind a dumpster. He flicked a switch and tossed the shock lure — it rolled and activated with a *high-pitched whine*.

The crawler froze. Its limbs twitched erratically, sensors flickering toward the lure.

“That’s right, ugly,” Robert muttered. He sprinted forward, leapt, and drove his dagger into one of the still-functioning legs.

Azariah clapped wildly. “We’re actually doing it!”

“You’re not *doing* anything!” Sage shouted, slinking around behind the crawler. With swift, silent motion, she jammed a jagged pipe into its spine. It arced violently — electricity snapped through the air.

The crawler shrieked. Not a scream, exactly — more like static vomiting through broken speakers.

Then it collapsed.

The silence returned, heavier now. Only their breathing filled the space.

“Everyone alive?” Marie asked, already checking for injuries.

“I’m emotionally wounded,” Jadrien called down. “You yelled at me. I need a cookie.”

“Shut up,” the group said in unison.

Adam crouched beside the bot’s corpse, examining it. “This one’s tech was barely functioning. If this had been a newer strain...”

“It wasn’t,” Michael said firmly. “Don’t overthink it.”

Marianna lowered her rifle. “One thing’s clear — they’re closer than we thought.”

Robert sheathed his dagger and looked down the alley. “Which means we need to move.”

Adam pocketed the lure and looked up at the rest of them. “Yeah. Fast.”

Chapter Three

Chapter III: Between the Ash and Echo

The sun barely touched the sky anymore. What light did break through the gray was pale, filtered through the static haze left behind by dead satellites and burned-out towers.

The group walked single file down an overgrown highway, fractured concrete giving way to dirt and weeds. Power lines sagged overhead like old spiderwebs. In the distance, the silhouette of their encampment—a gutted, reinforced freight warehouse—waited behind a rusted fence.

It had been a long day.

Robert kicked a can down the road. “So... can we talk about how I *definitely* saved everyone back there?”

“You stabbed one leg on a thing with six legs,” said Sage. “Congratulations. Truly a hero.”

Robert turned to walk backward, arms wide. “Oh, I’m sorry. Should I have performed a monologue while stabbing it?”

Marianna smirked. “You’d need brain cells for that.”

Michael snorted. Robert shot her a playful glare. “Was that a shot at me or Sage?”

“Whoever gets offended first,” she said sweetly.

“I’m *offended*,” Jadrien shouted from the back.

“Not you,” the group replied in tired unison.

Marianna fell in step beside Michael, eyes glinting with amusement. “You know, for someone who acts like a war machine, you sure got knocked on your ass back there.”

Michael rolled his shoulder. “It weighed a ton. And you’re welcome, by the way.”

“I mean, Adam distracted it more than you did—”

Adam, walking ahead with his headphones around his neck, looked up. “Wait, what did I do?”

“Nothing important,” Marianna chirped.

Michael scowled. “What’s your problem today?”

“Oh, *today* I have a problem?” she teased. “So yesterday I was delightful?”

“You were irritating yesterday too,” muttered Robert.

“Oh, there it is,” Marianna said with a grin. “See? I knew someone would crack first.”

Marie, who had been walking near the center of the group with her eyes half-lidded in practiced tolerance, finally stopped and turned.

“That’s enough,” she said, calm but firm.

Everyone actually paused. When Marie used *that* voice, even the TechRot would’ve hesitated.

“We’re low on sleep, low on supplies, and walking back into a base that still smells like boiled rat. If we’re going to survive another week without one of you dying, I’d prefer we keep the drama down to *one* person per day.” She turned to Marianna with a raised brow. “You already hit your limit.”

Marianna held her hands up, still smirking. “Fine, fine. No more fun.”

“You can have fun,” Marie said, resuming her pace. “Just try it without playing puppet master with everyone’s egos.”

Azariah trotted up beside her, whispering, “She’s really good at it though.”

“I *heard* that,” Marianna called over her shoulder.

“Good,” Azariah called back.

Sage snuck something from Jadrien’s belt pouch while he wasn’t looking and casually peeled open a protein bar. “This is my tax for emotional stress,” she mumbled.

“Hey!” Jadrien turned and spotted her mid-bite. “That was mine!”

“And now it’s mine.” She didn’t even blink.

Robert leaned over to Adam. “Remind me why we don’t just leave her behind.”

“She can get into anything, steal from anyone, and hasn’t been caught once,” Adam said without looking up from the copper wire he was fidgeting with. “We need her.”

Robert grunted. “Still.”

The group finally reached the outer fence. Marianna was the first to scale it, sniper slung across her back like a second spine. The rest followed, one by one, slipping back into the bones of their refuge — steel, silence, and the occasional flicker of distant lights on the horizon.

Inside the base, the air was thick with oil and dust. It wasn’t home. But it was a shelter.

And shelter meant survival.

Chapter Four

Chapter IV: Empty Bins and Sharp Eyes

The air inside the base was stale — a mix of oxidized metal, burnt wire, and something like old leather. The familiar scent should've been comforting. It wasn't.

Robert was already muttering by the time he reached the storage crates. He shoved one open, then another. His voice sharpened.

"No, no, no... this was full. *This one was full.*" He kicked the crate, a metallic *clang* echoing into the open space.

Adam stood beside a stripped-down table in the corner, a tangle of wires and screws laid out like a forgotten puzzle. His revolver holster hung loose on his hip. Slowly, he reached into a bin marked *gear parts* and pulled out nothing.

"Gone," he said flatly. "Someone's been here."

Robert spun around. "What do you mean someone? We've been *gone* less than a day."

"Doesn't take long to rob a place when you know what you're doing," Adam said, jaw clenched.

Marie stepped into the room with Sage behind her, both pausing at the sight of the two. "What's going on?" she asked.

"We were hit," Robert snapped. "Materials, rations, all the good scrap—cleaned out."

Sage raised a brow. "Could've been squatters."

Adam shook his head. "They were careful. Took stuff we actually use. Whoever it was, they *knew* what to grab."

Michael entered just in time to catch that last sentence. "Scouts from another camp?"

"Could be," Robert muttered, pacing. "Could be one of those creeps from the Northern strip. I knew they were watching us when we passed."

"Well, good news," Sage said, plopping down on a crate, "guess we're going back out sooner than expected."

"Not a chance," Adam said. "Not without prepping defenses first."

Michael turned toward him, arms crossed. "You thinking sentries?"

Adam nodded. "Low power. Motion triggered. I've got a couple lenses and a solar converter hidden in the back—unless *that's* gone too."

He stalked off toward his stash, and they all heard the audible sigh of relief a minute later when he shouted, “Still here!”

“Thank God,” Marie said quietly.

Robert crossed his arms. “We need to sweep the perimeter, check for signs of entry. Tracks, busted locks, anything.”

Michael nodded. “I’ll take west and south. You take east.”

“And the north?” Robert said with a small hint of annoyance in his voice.

“I trust Jadrien to scout it tomorrow. He’s got the range.”

Robert snorted. “Yeah, and the attention span of a goldfish.”

“Still fast,” Michael said, already heading for the door. “And loud when he’s not trying. Quiet when it matters.”

Adam returned with a bundle of scrap in one arm and a small solar panel under the other. “I’ll need two hours. Maybe three. Then we’ll have eyes on the camp 24/7.”

Sage tapped a ration box with her boot. “Unless they steal the sentries next.”

“I’ll rig them with shock failsafes,” Adam said, not looking at her.

“Spicy,” Azariah said from behind a pipe, where no one had noticed her sitting.

“How long have you been there?” Robert asked.

“Long enough to know someone’s in trouble,” she said brightly. “Probably us.”

Marianna leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “I’m more curious *why* someone stole from us now. Either they’re desperate... or they know something’s coming.”

Everyone went quiet for a beat.

Then Adam spoke. “We need to leave tomorrow. First light.”

Robert scowled. “We’re running on fumes.”

Adam finally looked up, and his voice was hard. “Then we better move fast.”

Night in the Wastes was a different kind of quiet. Not peace — never that — just the kind where even the air seemed to hold its breath. The group had settled in, bellies half-full and nerves still wound tight from the earlier discovery.

Adam crouched beside one of his newly-installed sentries, hands steady as he tightened a rusted bolt. The sentry's eye — a cracked lens from an old surveillance drone — whirred softly as it rotated on a pivot, scanning the barren perimeter.

"Shouldn't we give it a name?" Azariah said, leaning over his shoulder.

Adam didn't look up. "It's a turret, not a puppy."

"I'm naming it *Crispy*," she declared. "Because if it works, something's gonna get—"

Click.

A sound.

Sharp. Precise. *Wrong.*

Everyone froze. Even Azariah shut up.

The sentry gave off a soft *beep*, then rotated again — faster this time.

Adam's voice came low: "It's found something."

Robert stepped out of the makeshift bunker, dagger drawn. Michael followed, mace already resting on his shoulder, shield gripped tight.

From the far edge of the camp, something moved.

First, just a shimmer — then, a glitch in the air, like corrupted pixels bleeding into reality. The TechRot wasn't like normal threats. It didn't stomp or howl. It *seeped*.

A shape unfolded itself from the dark. Its body was barely humanoid, stretched thin and bound in black, sinewy cables. One arm was a mess of wire and chitin, ending in a jagged blade that clicked softly as it dragged across stone.

Mid-tier.

Faster than the one they'd seen before. Smarter too.

The sentry let off a warning chirp and sparked — a flash of blue and a pulse of heat.

The TechRot *twitched*, then *charged*.

"Now!" Adam barked.

The sentry fired. A tight coil of energy zipped out, catching the TechRot in the side. It jerked, staggered—but didn't fall.

Robert rushed forward to flank it, but the TechRot twisted impossibly fast and swung.

Michael intercepted the blade with his shield — sparks exploded on contact.

“It’s adapting!” he yelled. “Faster than the last one!”

Marianna’s voice came from the shadows behind: “Then I’ll just have to hit it before it adapts!”

CRACK.

A single shot echoed. Her sniper round tore through the thing’s leg joint. It buckled, twitching violently.

But it wasn’t dead.

It shrieked — a piercing, mechanical *glitch-scream* — and lurched toward the nearest sentry, trying to destroy the tech that hurt it.

“Not a chance,” Adam said, flipping a detonator from his belt.

The sentry exploded — not enough to damage the camp, just enough to vaporize anything within a meter.

The TechRot collapsed, one last flicker of its internal circuits glowing orange before fading out.

Silence again.

Then a slow clap.

Azariah.

“Well,” she said, brushing dust off her sleeves, “*Crispy* did her job.”

Adam exhaled, rubbing a smear of grease off his forehead. “Too close. It got too close.”

Michael looked at the scorched earth where the sentry had stood. “That was mid-level?”

Marianna slung her sniper back over her shoulder. “Which means the stronger ones are still out there.”

Marie stepped out from the medbay bunker. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Just my feelings,” Robert muttered.

“Good,” she said. “Then next time, try not to let it *scream* in your face.”

Adam turned to the rest. “We double the perimeter tonight. I want two people on watch, rotating every three hours. If something else gets in, we don’t wait — we end it fast.”

Sage grumbled but nodded.

Robert stared into the night, where the TechRot had come from. “We need to know *why* they’re this close now.”

“Or who brought it here,” Marianna added, eyes narrowed.

Chapter Five

Chapter V: Quiet Hours

Shift One: Michael & Robert

The stars overhead flickered through torn clouds, casting dull silver shadows across the camp. Michael sat with his back against the outer barricade, shield propped beside him. Robert was perched on an overturned crate, flipping his dagger in rhythmic, lazy arcs.

"You hear that scream again?" Robert asked.

Michael grunted. "Couldn't forget it if I tried."

A long pause.

Robert looked toward the dark. "You think we're ready? For more of them?"

Michael didn't answer right away. "We survived. That's what matters."

Robert scoffed. "You always talk like that. Like surviving is enough."

"It *is*," Michael said, sharper this time. "You think there's some big prize at the end of this? There's not. You stay alive. That's the win."

Robert studied him for a moment. "You're still pissed we lost supplies."

Michael cracked his knuckles. "Yeah. I am. Could've been avoided."

"I *get* it," Robert said. "But you don't have to carry it like it's all on you."

Michael didn't reply. He just reached for his mace and adjusted the handle.

Some wounds didn't bleed — they just sat, heavy in the silence.

Shift Two: Marianna & Marie

Marianna twirled a stray strand of hair as she leaned against the outer post, watching the quiet horizon. Marie sat nearby, cross-legged, reading something scribbled into a wrinkled notebook.

"You know," Marianna started, voice low, "I could stir up some real chaos tomorrow."

Marie didn't look up. "You could not."

Marianna smirked. "Boring."

“I mean it,” Marie said, eyes finally lifting. “We’re already stressed enough. One wrong word and someone snaps.”

“Oh come on. Drama keeps people sharp.”

Marie’s gaze was cool. “Drama gets people *dead*.”

Marianna was quiet for a moment, lips pursed.

Then, softly, “You ever miss how it was before?”

Marie closed the notebook. “Before TechRot? Before survival was all we did?”

Marianna nodded.

“All the time,” Marie said.

A long silence followed. It wasn’t heavy — just true.

Shift Three: Adam

Alone now.

Adam sat cross-legged on top of the storage container, eyes scanning the perimeter — one hand on his revolver, the other slowly tapping against the music player wired into his ear.

Tinny notes buzzed just loud enough for him to hum along.

Classical remix. Something old. Something comforting.

The tech beside him blinked green — a small, silent nod from the sentry systems.

He should’ve felt secure.

Instead, his fingers fiddled with a small brass gear from his hoard, flipping it back and forth.

“I don’t trust this quiet,” he muttered under his breath.

His eyes were tired, but his mind was buzzing — building things, breaking them, rebuilding them better. Always better.

Sometimes the music drowned the past. Sometimes it didn’t.

Tonight it almost did.

Shift Four: Sage & Azariah

Azariah kicked her feet lazily from a ledge, chewing on a stale ration bar with visible regret.

"This tastes like soap," she said.

Sage, crouched nearby with her hood half up, didn't respond.

"You think Adam's okay? He looked twitchier than usual."

Sage shrugged. "He's always twitchy. Built like a wound."

"That's deep. You write poetry or something?"

"No," Sage said flatly. "You do enough talking for both of us."

Azariah grinned. "That's fair."

A beat.

"Hey... did you take anything from the stash?"

Sage looked at her sideways. "Would I tell you if I did?"

Azariah's grin faltered slightly. "I mean... no. But I'd still *ask*."

Sage didn't answer. Her eyes stayed on the treeline.

Then she said, "I only take what we won't miss."

Azariah looked like she wanted to respond, but then—decided not to.

Instead, she swung her feet again and said, "Well, if you ever decide to steal from me, at least take the soap bars."

Sage cracked a rare smirk. "Deal."

Chapter Six

Chapter VI: Dust Roads

The sun barely broke through the ashen sky as the group prepared to move. Everything they brought was either tied down, strapped up, or stuffed in packs that clinked with scavenged gear and repurposed tech.

The plan was simple: make their way to an old retail strip on the outskirts of a dead zone. Word from a trader hinted it hadn't been picked clean. But plans rarely stayed simple for long.

"Three miles out," Robert muttered, checking his crudely drawn map. "Two if we cut through the husk field."

Michael scoffed. "You want to cut through the field full of husks?"

"I *want* to get there before sundown," Robert shot back.

"Then we don't bring Azariah. She'll stop to name every burnt-out appliance."

"I *heard* that!" Azariah shouted from behind, tripping over a piece of rebar with comedic timing.

Adam walked toward the front of the line, revolver at his hip, a tightly rolled schematic sticking out of his coat pocket. "If we go around the field, I know a path through the radio flats. Less exposure. More debris to hide behind."

Marianna adjusted her sniper across her back. "Oh, good. I love walking through the graveyard of ancient tech. Really gets the paranoia flowing."

"I *like* the flats," Sage said suddenly. "Lots of shadows. Easy to disappear."

"That's comforting," Marie deadpanned.

They moved in a loose wedge formation. Michael and Robert up front, Marianna occasionally moving ahead to scout higher ground. Azariah stuck near Sage, humming tunelessly as she stepped around rusted wreckage.

Adam walked in silence, every so often reaching into his jacket to fiddle with a broken bolt or trinket. His eyes never stopped scanning.

The landscape was a scrapyard's dream and a survivor's nightmare. The remains of civilization lay scattered: collapsed billboards, skeletal cars, whole buildings half-eaten by TechRot vines. The infestation didn't just grow — it *inhabited*, turning forgotten tech into nests of twitching filaments and jagged chrome limbs.

Every now and then, the group passed remnants of things that weren't fully dead — a still-glowing terminal buried in vines, a drone twitching like it remembered how to fly.

“Any movement?” Marie asked Marianna.

Marianna scanned the distance through her scope. “Nothing... yet. But something *feels* off.”

“Could be the fact that we’re walking into a place people stopped visiting for a reason,” Jadrien said from the rear, finally catching up after disappearing to scout ahead for half a mile.

“Good to see you alive,” Robert said dryly.

“Good to *be* alive,” Jadrien said with a grin. “Also, I may have found a road we can use. Less rubble. No sign of TechRot — yet.”

“That means it’s either abandoned,” Marie said, “or it’s *hunting ground*.”

Everyone was quiet for a beat.

“Can’t wait to find out which,” Adam muttered.

As they crested a rise, the retail strip finally came into view.

Half-collapsed signs stuck out of the dust like gravestones. Faded brands, gutted storefronts, and walls grown over with creeping steel vines. A convenience store sat near the edge — mostly intact. Promising.

Azariah pointed. “That one. That looks untouched.”

“No such thing anymore,” Michael said.

Robert nodded. “We’ll get there by nightfall if we move fast.”

“Let’s just hope we’re not being *watched*,” Sage murmured.

No one laughed and just kept walking.

A bridge came into view like a bad omen.

Rust-eaten, railings warped, and long enough that the far side seemed to shimmer in the haze. The river below had long dried up, leaving behind a jagged ravine filled with scrap and broken piping. The only thing that moved was the wind — and even that felt wrong.

“Looks like it’ll hold,” Robert said doubtfully.

“‘Looks like’ isn’t confidence,” Michael muttered, gripping his shield.

Sage crouched to examine the surface. “Still intact. Barely. If we go one at a time—”

“No time for that,” Adam cut in. “Sun’s going down. We need to move.”

Marianna went first, light on her feet, sniper across her back. Then Robert, Azariah, Sage, Marie, Jadrien, and finally Michael and Adam at the rear.

They were halfway across when the sound came:
clickclickclickclick—

Too fast. Too light to be heavy.
Too close.

From beneath the bridge's understructure, five small TechRot creatures launched out like they were shot from cannons. Insectile and skeletal, with twitching spines and blade-like limbs, they skittered across the rusted metal with horrifying speed. They were no larger than dogs — but every movement screamed *precision* and *malice*.

“CONTACT!” Marianna shouted, already dropping to one knee and lining up her shot.

CRACK. The first bullet tore through one — a mess of fluid and shrapnel.

But the others kept coming.

Michael raised his shield just in time to catch a leaping creature — its claws *shrieked* against the surface as it tried to carve its way through. He slammed it down, then drove his mace into its twitching frame.

Another circled and slashed at his unprotected thigh.

“Damn it!” he roared, stumbling back, blood already soaking through his pants.

Adam fired from the rear, his revolver thundering. Sparks danced as he clipped another in mid-pounce.

“They’re too damn fast!” Michael shouted.

“Then don’t *stand still!*” Sage yelled, appearing behind one of the creatures and jamming a broken blade into its neck-joint. It shrieked — and fell.

Marianna was already reloading. “Two left!”

One of them leapt for Azariah. She screamed — but Adam lunged, yanking it back and crushing its twitching frame underfoot.

The last tried to flee — fast as it came.

Marianna’s second shot split its core before it could disappear into the metalwork.

Then... silence.

Only the hum of dying TechRot and the pained groan of Michael echoed on the wind.

Everyone rushed to him. Marie knelt fast, pressing gauze into the wound.

“He’ll live,” she said, voice tight. “But he won’t walk fast. Not for a while.”

Michael gritted his teeth. “I could’ve handled them if they didn’t—*move* like that.”

“They weren’t built for brute force,” Adam said, panting slightly. “They were scouts. Or skirmishers.”

“They wanted to bleed us. Not kill us,” Marianna added. “They knew exactly who to hit.”

Sage wiped her blade on her sleeve. “We got lucky.”

Robert helped Michael to his feet. “This store better be *worth it*.”

As the group moved off the bridge, shadows grew longer behind them.

The TechRot were adapting.

And they weren’t done yet.

Chapter Seven

Chapter VII: Aisles and Shadows

The automatic doors to the store were stuck open — frozen in place, rusted at the hinges. Dust-laced sunlight spilled into the broken aisles of what used to be a general goods store. Shelves were toppled, their contents scattered and looted years ago. But not everything was gone.

“Jackpot,” Robert whispered as he stepped inside. “Still some shelves standing.”

“Stay sharp,” Adam muttered, already scanning the ceiling corners for signs of TechRot.

Michael leaned against the entrance, pale but upright, mace in hand. “I’ll guard the front. Don’t take too long.”

Marie nodded, already drifting toward the pharmacy section with a practiced eye. “Painkillers first. Then bandages.”

Marianna moved upstairs to a balcony-level café with clear lines of sight. “I’ve got overwatch.”

The rest fanned out, working their way through dim aisles and shattered glass. The sound of distant footsteps echoed — not their own.

“Did anyone hear that?” Azariah whispered, peering into a freezer section that still smelled faintly like scorched plastic.

Sage paused mid-pocketing a can of fruit. “Yeah.”

“Movement,” Jadrien said from the far side of the store, perched on top of a checkout lane. “Light, fast.”

“Not TechRot,” Adam said under his breath. “Too... human.”

They followed the noise.

A shadow zipped between endcaps.

Robert bolted after it. “Hey! Wait!”

The figure didn’t wait. Just kept running.

A teenage boy — thin, wiry, wild-eyed — ducked under a fallen display and slid into the garden section. He was fast. Desperate.

“Definitely alive,” Sage muttered, tailing him through a side aisle.

The group coordinated instinctively.

Adam moved to cut him off from behind.

Marianna gave a visual from above.

Marie and Azariah spread wide, blocking flanks.

Jadrien, grinning, joined the chase. “Finally, something weird *not* covered in wires.”

The boy darted into the storage hallway at the back of the store. A dead end.

He stopped, back to the wall, chest heaving.

He wasn’t armed — or if he was, he wasn’t reaching for anything.

Adam rounded the corner, revolver already half-drawn but not aimed. “Hey. Easy.”

The boy looked back and forth, trapped. Panicked.

Sage slipped in from the other side. “We’re not here to hurt you. Unless you make us.”

“You live here?” Robert asked, stepping into view.

The boy didn’t respond.

His fingers twitched near his jacket — then stopped.

Marianna’s voice came through the earpiece. “You’ve got him boxed in. But he keeps glancing up. Ceiling vent above him. Might bolt again.”

Everyone froze.

No one even breathed.

The abandoned store was half-emptied of anything useful, dust-slick shelves groaning under the weight of a decade of decay. The group had taken what they could, but the real find wasn’t canned goods or batteries — it was the boy.

Now, seated around a cracked tile floor under flickering emergency lights they’d strung up, the group weighed a new kind of risk.

Alex sat in the far corner, hunched and silent, his eyes flickering between people like a cornered cat. Dirt smudged his cheek, and his knees were pulled tight to his chest.

“I don’t like it,” Michael said first, pacing. His mace tapped the floor with each step. “We find some kid hiding in the shadows and we’re just supposed to take him with us? For all we know, he’s TechRot bait.”

“He’s not infected,” Marie said, arms crossed, calm but unreadable. “I checked. No sign of fever, scarring, tech growth. He’s just... scared.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not trouble,” Michael shot back.

“Look at him,” Marianna chimed in, flicking a pebble toward the floor. “He’s ten. He hasn’t said a word since we found him. If he was going to gut us or lead TechRot here, wouldn’t he have tried?”

Robert was leaned back against a metal shelf, chewing a stick of jerky. “I mean, I vote we take him. He’s not taking up space, and if he slows us down we deal with it then.”

“That’s cold,” Azariah muttered. “But... yeah. I vote yes too. Poor guy looks like he’s been through hell.”

Sage, sitting on the floor picking at her boot laces, shrugged. “He’s small. I like that. Harder to catch. Good instincts. Keep him.”

Adam, who’d been fiddling with a busted radio, finally spoke up. “He talked to me. Quietly. Asked what I was building. That’s more than he’s said to anyone else. He’s curious, not hostile.”

Jadrien snorted. “Oh, well if he’s into gears and gizmos, that changes everything.”

“Shut up,” Adam muttered, not even looking at him.

“Look,” Marianna said, rising to her feet. “If five of us say yes and three say no, majority rules. Unless we’re running a dictatorship now?”

Michael’s jaw clenched, but he glanced over at Alex again. “If he steps out of line—”

“He won’t,” Marie said, voice firm. “But if he does, we’ll deal with it.”

Jadrien threw his hands up in surrender. “Fine. But if he gets weird, I’m not bunking near him.”

With the decision made, Alex still hadn’t spoken. But he seemed to uncurl slightly, shoulders lowering, just a bit. His gaze met Adam’s — a silent connection, uncertain but present.

The group began packing their supplies again. Whatever Alex’s story was, he was theirs now — at least for a while.

Chapter Eight

Chapter VIII: Quiet Gears Turning

The sun was dipping low, the ruined skyline burning orange behind skeletal trees as the group made their way back toward camp. Their boots crunched over gravel and broken glass, the cart of supplies creaking with every step. The air buzzed with distant static — always a sign TechRot was somewhere nearby, but far enough not to worry. For now.

Alex walked beside Adam, hands tucked into the sleeves of an oversized coat Robert had tossed him. His eyes flicked to the gadget in Adam's hand — some sort of compact drone he was halfway through rebuilding with scrap he'd found in the store.

"What's it for?" Alex asked, voice barely above the crunch of gravel.

Adam glanced over, a bit surprised. "Surveillance. Scouting ahead. Or just for fun, sometimes." He held it out. "Wanna see how it opens?"

Alex nodded, took it carefully, and flipped the side panels open like he'd done it before. Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Been around tech?" he asked.

Alex shrugged. "Sometimes."

Adam didn't press. He just grinned a little. "You've got good hands. If you ever wanna help me build something, let me know."

Alex didn't answer, but he didn't hand the drone back either.

Behind them, Marianna was telling a story — something dramatic and probably half made up. Alex's ear twitched when she mentioned someone falling off a roof and landing on a vending machine.

"Does that happen often?" he asked, turning toward her.

Marianna blinked, surprised. "What, random falling? With these idiots? All the time."

That got a chuckle from Robert, who had been dragging the cart. "Hey, I only fell twice."

Alex mentally noted: Robert - clumsy, but jokes about it. Marianna - likes attention.

Sage looped around to walk backwards in front of him. "You always this quiet, or just sizing us up?"

Alex tilted his head. "Both."

Sage grinned wide. "I like you."

He didn't respond, but didn't flinch either. She was unpredictable — something to be cautious around.

Azariah passed a canteen toward him. "Drink. You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

Alex took a sip, watching her. Generous. Talks a lot. Hides things under a smile.

Eventually, Michael fell into step next to him, walking in silence for a long time. Then, "You mess with any of us, I'll break your arm."

Alex looked up at him and nodded. "Okay."

Michael narrowed his eyes, but moved on. Protective. Short fuse. Noted.

At the rear, Marie approached. "You're evaluating us," she said softly, not asking.

Alex didn't deny it.

Marie gave a small smile. "Good. You should. Just don't take too long to trust. We don't bite."

Alex looked ahead at the group — noisy, strange, layered in scars and secrets. Not safe, not really. But maybe safer than being alone.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Chapter Nine

Chapter IX: First Night, Second Thoughts

The camp came into view just past the ridge — a rough barricade of rusted metal, scavenged solar panels, and Adam's hastily welded sensor poles twitching like mechanical antennae. The sentries at the perimeter — cobbled together turrets and scanning drones — still hummed and clicked, their lights glowing red until they recognized the group's signals.

"Still working," Adam said with a proud grin, patting one of the scrap-built towers as they passed through. "No breaches."

"Doesn't mean we weren't still robbed," Robert muttered. "Let's not forget that part."

Michael, bandaged from the bridge ambush, trudged silently past, expression tight. He said nothing, but his eyes scanned everything — looking for signs of new trouble. He'd barely spoken since the fight.

Inside the camp, the air felt heavier. Familiar. Safer, if only relatively.

"Alright, same layout," Marie said, taking command. "Supplies into the container room. Adam, check the sensors again after we unload. Michael, sit down before you fall down."

"No arguments here," Michael muttered, already lowering himself onto a crate with a wince.

Azariah flopped onto her usual hammock, Sage raided the ration stash for something sweet, and Marianna immediately began low-level gossip with Jadrien, who barely had the energy to keep up. The mood had shifted from survival mode to the usual rhythm of post-expedition fatigue.

Alex stood near the supply cart, his shoulders tense.

Adam came up beside him, wiping his hands on a grease-stained rag. "Come on. Let's get you a bunk. You get to pick."

Alex followed, weaving between old tents, bunks welded from bedsprings and scrap steel, patched tarps and sheets creating personal corners of space.

"This one's mine," Adam said, gesturing to a nook cluttered with gadgets, bits of wiring, and shiny metal odds and ends. "You're welcome to crash near here. You'd probably sleep through my music eventually."

Alex's fingers twitched at the sight of the tech pile. It was safe. Familiar. But then—

"You can also take this one," Marie said from behind, gesturing to a calmer, neater space a few bunks away. Her corner was tidied, her supplies organized, and her expression soft but watchful. "Less noise. Fewer... grease explosions."

Adam raised an eyebrow. “Hey—”

“I’m just saying,” Marie added with a faint smirk.

Alex stood between them, eyes moving back and forth. Adam’s chaos buzzed with invention and curiosity — but it was loud. Marie’s space was quiet, orderly — but... distant.

He didn’t answer. Not right away.

“You don’t have to decide now,” Marie said gently. “Get a feel for the place. Try both if you want.”

Adam tossed him a roll of fabric. “Whichever you pick, I call dibs on your help next time I’m fixing something.”

Alex nodded, quietly grateful for the space to choose — and for the fact that no one pushed harder than that.

He settled that night in the space between their two bunks, not quite choosing, not quite avoiding. Just watching.

Listening.

Learning.

The sun cracked over the ruined treetops the next morning, casting harsh gold through the torn canvas roof of the encampment. Alex hadn’t slept much. Instead, he’d watched — eyes shifting between Marie’s neat corner and Adam’s noisy chaos.

When camp began to stir — metal clanging, water heating, voices rising in sleepy arguments — he made his move.

He set his rolled blanket down near Adam’s bunk.

Adam blinked at the sound, rubbing his eyes. “Oh? Picked me, huh?”

Alex gave a short nod, already crouched near one of Adam’s half-disassembled drones.

Adam grinned and tossed him a small, rusted wrench. “Then welcome to the explosion zone, partner.”

The rest of the day, Alex kept moving — not aimless, but deliberate. Watching. Asking. Practicing.

With Adam, he learned how to rewire a motion sensor.

“Touch the blue wire and you’re fine,” Adam said. “Touch the red and you might lose a finger.”
Alex paused. “You’re joking, right?”
Adam just smirked.

With Robert, he tried sorting scavenged materials.

“Tin, copper, steel. Don’t mix ’em or Adam’ll yell at you worse than Marie does when someone eats an extra ration.”
Robert offered a rare, easy grin when Alex got it right the first time.

With Marie, he learned how to clean and dress a wound.

She guided his hands silently as he wrapped a torn strip of fabric around a mannequin’s makeshift “arm.”
“You don’t flinch,” she said. “That’s good.”

With Marianna, he practiced aiming a slingshot.

“Pretend it’s someone annoying,” she said. “That’s what I do.”
Alex, to her surprise, hit the mark.
She grinned. “Okay, I like you.”

With Michael, it was less learning, more watching.

Michael trained in silence, striking at a wooden dummy with slow, powerful precision.
“Too big for you,” he muttered without looking.
Alex nodded. “I know. But it’s still useful to see.”

With Azariah, he learned trade tricks — mostly games.

“Make eye contact, act clueless, then ask for double. Boom. Profit.”
Alex smiled slightly. “You’re scary.”
Azariah winked. “I know.”

With Sage, it was sleight of hand and quick fingers.

She made a ration bar disappear right out of his pocket.
“You’re learning fast,” she said.
“You’re stealing from me,” he replied.
Sage cackled. “Now you’re getting it.”

That night, as the campfire crackled and laughter rose and faded with the breeze, Alex sat by himself, back to the wall. He didn’t speak much — but for the first time, he looked less like a stranger and more like a piece of the whole.

Chapter Ten

Chapter X: Ghosts of the Grid

The morning haze still clung to the treetops as the group set out beyond their usual scavenging radius, following a cracked service road that disappeared into dense, TechRot-scorched woodland. Their target: a series of abandoned outposts once used by survivors in the early years of the outbreak.

"They're probably picked clean," Robert said, pulling his hood up. "But Adam wants wires and Marie's low on meds."

"Stop complaining," Sage replied. "You'd loot a vending machine just to rearrange the snacks."

Ahead, Jadrien swung a makeshift machete at low-hanging vines, cutting a haphazard path. "Adventure awaits!" he called out dramatically, nearly tripping over a root. "Or maybe a horrifying death. Who knows?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Don't trip into an ambush, idiot."

"I was *creating suspense!*" Jadrien grinned.

Behind them, Alex kept close to Adam and Marie. His eyes scanned the underbrush and old power poles, watching for movement — and also for learning opportunities.

The first encampment came into view just past noon. Collapsed metal fencing, a watchtower half-swallowed by vines, and a crumbling generator setup.

"Someone left in a hurry," Marianna noted. "Doors are wide open."

The group fanned out — pairs and trios assigned by habit.

Adam and Alex moved toward the tech tent. Inside, piles of corroded gear. Adam gestured to components while Alex jotted mental notes, then carefully placed a usable circuit board into his pack.

Robert, Jadrien, and Michael explored the central building. Jadrien cracked jokes non-stop. Robert looted anything of value. Michael broke open a locked crate with his shield. "Painkillers," Michael muttered, tossing the bag to Robert. "You owe me."

Marianna climbed the remains of the watchtower for a vantage check.

"Nothing moving yet," she called down. "But there's another camp two miles out. Might be worth a look."

Sage and Azariah combed through an old trade post, Azariah pocketing trinkets. “If they’re shiny, they’re *probably* valuable,” she said. Sage found a sealed ration box and claimed it with a grin.

Marie, meanwhile, kept to the medical bay, silently packing anything clean and labeling what wasn’t.

As they regrouped outside, packs heavier, Adam handed Alex a cracked but still-readable circuit chart. “Study this. It’s how I learned half my shortcuts.”

Alex nodded. “Thanks.”

“I mean, it’s probably dangerous if you wire it wrong, but hey—live and learn.”

Michael smirked. “That explains so much about your devices.”

Azariah chimed in. “If something explodes, I’m blaming Jadrien.”

“I accept this destiny,” Jadrien replied, arms raised to the sky.

With another outpost ahead and dusk creeping closer, the group adjusted gear and headed out again — the ghosts of past survivors lingering behind them in every cracked foundation and tangled wire.

They hadn’t seen TechRot yet.

But it always found a way.

The second outpost was quieter than the first — eerily so. The air carried a low hum, like interference crawling through old wires. The group arrived just as the sun dipped below the treeline, casting long, jagged shadows across the half-sunken structures.

“Place looks like it melted,” Sage muttered, toeing a patch of scorched soil near the edge of a broken solar panel.

Robert gave a low whistle. “Weird burn marks. Like something clawed through the walls.”

“Something probably did,” Marianna said, unslinging her rifle.

Adam crouched near a crumpled communications tower. “Power lines are shredded — not just broken. Look at the bite patterns.” His voice lowered. “TechRot’s been here.”

“Low-tier scavenger type,” Michael guessed. “Fast ones. Hard to hit.”

“I hate the fast ones,” Azariah muttered, pulling closer to Marie.

As if summoned by tension, a flicker of movement darted between the shadows of two ruined tents.

“Movement—right flank!” Marianna called out. She lifted her sniper instinctively but didn’t fire. “Too fast to track.”

The team snapped into motion.

Three small TechRot units scuttled into view — all legs and needle-like appendages, twitching with static pulses. Their metal plating shimmered with oily black and copper, wires snapping like insect wings as they hissed and split apart.

“Splicers,” Adam said sharply. “Cutters. Low-level but nasty. Watch the legs!”

Michael charged first, shield up — but the first Splicer darted low and zipped past, slicing across his calf before veering off. He roared in pain and swung wide, but missed.

“I can’t pin them down!” he shouted.

Marianna found her angle, tracked the nearest Splicer, and fired — a clean shot straight through its core. The creature collapsed in a jerking mess of sparking tendrils.

Sage flanked another, sliding under a rusted beam and burying her blade into its underside. “Got you, you twitchy little freak.”

The last two scattered, weaving through debris. Adam lobbed a stun coil he’d patched together hours earlier. It detonated with a crackle of light, knocking one Splicer off balance. Alex, watching from cover, flinched but didn’t run.

Robert moved in with his makeshift dagger and finished the stunned one with a grunt. “Next time, use one of those earlier!”

“I just finished wiring it!” Adam snapped.

The final Splicer zipped toward Azariah — who screamed, tripped, and landed flat on her back. Just as it lunged, Marie stepped forward, drove a salvaged spear straight through the machine’s neck, and pinned it to the dirt. It convulsed once, then stopped.

Silence fell.

Breathless, the group stared at the pile of smoldering parts.

“Everyone okay?” Marie asked, panting.

“Michael’s hit,” Marianna said. “Leg wound.”

“Clean slice. I’ll live,” Michael growled, limping. “Still hate the fast ones.”

Adam picked up one of the remains, examining the twitching circuit core. “We’ll start seeing more of these. They were scouting.”

“They know we’re here,” Marianna said quietly.

Alex said nothing — just stared at the corpse of the TechRot, eyes wide, then back at the group. A machine made of infected tech, killed by teamwork and chaos.

He said softly, to no one in particular: “You’re all really good at this.”

Sage gave him a sideways grin. “Stick around, kid. You might be too.”

Chapter Eleven

Chapter XI: Splinter Lines

The air was thick with the scorched stench of burnt metal and ozone. The last twitch of the downed TechRot unit fizzled out in a muted pop, leaving only the static-laced hum of fried circuitry. Around it, the group stood in a loose circle, their breathing heavy, eyes darting, adrenaline still surging.

Michael sat on a slab of weathered concrete, a fresh gash across his leg. Blood soaked through Marie's bandages as she worked in silence, jaw clenched tight.

"We should go back," Robert said first, folding his arms. "It's not worth pressing further when we're already hurt. That hit was too close."

"We didn't even make it into the outpost," Adam countered, examining one of the melted appendages. "These were low-level scouts. Whatever's running them might be inside. If we're turning back every time a drone sneezes, we're never going to make progress."

"We're down a fighter," Marie said sharply without looking up. "Michael's slower now. That means slower exits."

"I can still swing," Michael muttered. "Just not sprint."

"Still a liability," Marianna added, her tone cool. "And we're too far from camp for anyone to bail and make it back before nightfall."

Jadrien leaned on his blowgun, unusually quiet for once. "But if we *don't* look now, someone else will. And if we *are* already hurt, better to find what we need *here* than go home empty and come right back."

Azariah crossed her arms. "I say we stay. Reinforce the old buildings, set a few traps. We're not amateurs. And we could use the supplies."

Sage nodded. "Could use a few batteries myself."

Marie looked up at that, her gaze hard. "You'd risk the whole group for batteries?"

"I'd risk it because we're always risking it," Sage said with a shrug. "You think it'll be easier next week?"

The argument stalled as everyone's eyes shifted to Alex. The boy stood a little apart from them, dust clinging to his boots, his gaze sharp despite his age.

"If you go back now," he said slowly, "you'll still need to come back. And they might be ready next time."

Silence followed.

Adam gave a quiet nod. "Alright. We stay. But no sleeping shifts — we rotate watch in pairs, reinforced positions only. One wrong sound and we pull out."

Michael exhaled through his nose. "Good. Because if I limp out here for nothing, I'm not coming back."

"Noted," Robert said dryly.

"Someone help me set up a perimeter," Adam added, already pulling out sensor wires.

As the group fanned out again, tension still lingered in the air — a battlefield of opinions and loyalties. The vote was settled, but the risks remained. Night was falling fast.

And they were still deep in TechRot territory.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter XII: The Girl with the Glitched Hound

The ruins of the second encampment were quieter than expected. The group moved cautiously past the outer fence — collapsed in places, charred black in others. The remains of past skirmishes were everywhere: melted metal, empty bullet casings, a scorch mark that looked too organic to be from anything manmade.

Adam was already twitching with anticipation. “Old gear. Maybe a server room. Something in here *has* to be worth salvaging.”

“I don’t like how still it is,” Marie said, eyes darting between rooftops. “No birds, no wind. Just... quiet.”

As they crept through the central plaza, they saw it.

A low shape stepped out from the shadow of a collapsed comms tower.

Metal limbs. Filthy, patchy fur.

A TechRot Hound.

Its head turned with the smooth, jerky mechanics of an infected drone. The viral-looking tubing pulsing faintly in its sides glowed with the same sickly teal as every other TechRot abomination they’d fought.

Weapons came up *instantly*.

“Back up—” Michael’s shield was halfway raised. “It’s alone, we can take it—”

“No!” a voice called out from behind the beast.

Everyone froze.

A girl — maybe a year or two older than them — stepped forward from a rusted stairwell, her hands raised slowly. She had dark gloves with blinking nodes, a jerry-rigged backpack covered in wires, and a small terminal device strapped to her wrist.

The TechRot Hound stepped protectively in front of her, growling in a low, static-buzz hum.

“Easy, Sentry,” she said calmly. “They’re not a threat unless they make themselves one.”

The group exchanged glances, unsure if they should lower their weapons or *raise* them higher.

“Who the hell are you?” Robert asked.

"Allison," she said, patting the hound's side. "And this is a hacked Level 2 canine unit. I call him Sentry."

"You... *hacked* a TechRot?" Adam blinked. "That's not possible. The virus scrambles its base code once it takes over—"

"Unless you reroute through the neural subroutines before the host mind locks in," she cut in with a grin. "It's not clean. Took me months. But yeah. Possible."

Adam's eyes lit up like someone had just gifted him a fully functional mech. "That's insane. How did you keep the hive-mind from reclaiming it?"

"Reinforced loop signal. Keeps the command channel isolated. Mostly."

The rest of the group didn't share his enthusiasm. Michael kept his mace ready. Marianna hovered near her rifle.

"So you're saying that thing isn't going to rip us apart in our sleep?" Sage asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Not unless I tell him to," Allison said plainly.

Azariah gave a low whistle. "Spicy."

Marie stepped forward, voice flat. "If you're staying near us, that thing sleeps *outside*."

Allison shrugged. "Fair."

Adam leaned toward her, fascinated. "Do you have logs of its behavior? Interface readouts? Command stability rates?"

Allison smiled, and for a moment, her guarded expression cracked into something warm. "Only about a hundred pages of them."

Robert groaned. "Oh great. Now there's *two* of them."

Jadrien whispered to Michael, "If she builds more, we're all dead."

Michael nodded grimly.

Still, no one made a move to push her out. Not yet.

There was too much value in what she knew — and too many questions left unanswered.

And as Sentry sat quietly beside her, its mechanical tail twitching in a mimicry of a real dog's behavior, even the most skeptical among them had to admit one thing:

The rules of the TechRot just got rewritten.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter XIII: Fractures in the Signal

The group moved deeper into the ruined encampment, eyes and weapons still glancing every few seconds toward the mechanical hound padding silently beside its master. Sentry's claws clinked faintly on concrete, each step echoing like a countdown.

No one said it aloud, but tension pulsed through the air like static before a storm.

Michael led, keeping his distance from Allison, shield raised just a touch higher than usual. Marianna flanked their right, rifle in hand, lips pressed into a hard line. Even Sage — usually the first to joke — kept throwing cautious glances behind them, where Allison and Adam walked side by side near the back of the group.

They whispered to each other in low, rapid tones. Allison's hands moved as she spoke, gesturing through imagined diagrams. Adam nodded eagerly, responding just as quickly, and now and then both would chuckle or break into hushed excitement.

"What are they even talking about?" Robert asked under his breath, shifting the weight of a toolbox on his shoulder.

"Nothing good," Michael muttered.

"They're nerding out over rot monsters," Marianna added. "I'd bet anything on it."

Sage leaned toward Azariah. "Why is she even here? We've survived this long without needing a walking threat on a leash."

Azariah gave a small shrug. "Honestly? I kinda like her. She's got style."

"She's got a killer robot dog," Robert hissed.

"Exactly."

Meanwhile, Marie busied herself in the old infirmary, shoving anything sterile or salvageable into her pack with pointed focus. She didn't speak, but her glances toward Allison were cold and calculating. Protective.

Alex, quiet as always, lingered near Marie but kept sneaking peeks toward the rear of the group, watching the unfamiliar girl and her terrifying companion with open skepticism.

Up ahead, Jadrien kicked a door open with theatrical flair. "I've breached the supply closet of destiny!"

"No one's laughing, Jadrien," Michael said flatly.

“Wasn’t for laughs,” Jadrien replied, stepping aside to let Robert rummage inside. “Trying to lighten the murder tension.”

Near the back of the group, Adam handed Allison a rusted data shard.

“Think there’s any archived routines on this?” he asked, eyes gleaming.

Allison took it delicately. “If there are, I can decrypt it. Might even be original TechRot code before the virus evolved. You could learn a lot from how it branched.”

Adam and Allison’s voices stayed low, the kind of conversation no one else could follow — half technical, half shared language.

Sentry, meanwhile, stood utterly still, its head tracking every person who moved within ten feet. The glow of its infected tubing pulsed softly like a heartbeat.

By the time the sun began to drop behind shattered rooftops, the group had enough gear to fill two packs each — but no one mentioned staying overnight.

Too much tension. Too many questions.

And one new presence still unproven.

As they gathered at the center of the plaza, preparing for the hike home, Michael finally spoke.

“She walks in with a pet monster, and now we’re just... fine with it?”

“No,” Marie said. “We’re not.”

Adam looked up from a scanner in his hand. “She’s not a threat. And she might be the key to understanding how TechRot actually *thinks*. That’s worth something.”

“She’s worth watching,” Michael replied.

Allison raised her eyebrows. “I’m literally standing right here.”

“Good,” Marianna said. “Then you can hear us not trusting you.”

Azariah gave an exaggerated sigh. “Can we all just survive the trip back before deciding if we’re enemies or besties?”

Jadrien raised a hand. “I vote for ‘besties.’ Less stabbing.”

No one laughed.

Adam and Allison exchanged one last glance — somewhere between amused and conspiratorial.

They all turned toward the forest path again, weapons ready, nerves strung tight.

The camp behind them was dead.

The road ahead wasn't any safer.

But the real danger, perhaps, was already walking beside them.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter XIV: Loyalty Earned in Blood

The wind had picked up, sifting through broken rafters and scraping old wires against the metal bones of the encampment. The group moved in tense formation, bags fuller than before — circuit boards, batteries, ration cans, and a few sealed med kits — but their senses were on edge.

“We should head back soon,” Marie said, scanning the long corridor ahead. “Visibility’s dropping.”

“Just five more minutes,” Adam muttered, crouching to yank a scorched terminal from a wall panel. Allison knelt beside him, feeding power from a portable pack into the core.

“Watch the feedback loop,” she whispered.

Adam smirked. “Please. I practically invented the loop.”

They shared a quiet laugh, voices low — isolated from the rest of the group.

Marianna, meanwhile, climbed a shattered stairwell to get a better view of the area beyond. She squinted into the distance, fingers tightening around her rifle.

And then—

A guttural, synthetic growl.

From the shadows between two blown-out storefronts, they emerged — sleek, canine TechRot hounds. Four of them. Smaller than Sentry, but faster. Their movements glitched with biomechanical twitches. Glowing veins of teal laced their bodies like infection made manifest.

“AMBUSH!” Marianna yelled.

The creatures didn’t hesitate. Two leapt toward the center of the group. One bounded toward Michael, teeth clanging off his shield in a flurry of sparks. The fourth — almost too fast to track — charged Marianna at the top of the stairs.

She fired once — missed.

The hound slammed into her, sending her sprawling. The others followed.

Screams erupted as Marianna vanished under a tangle of gnashing metal jaws and shredded fur. Her rifle skidded down the steps, useless.

“MARIANNA!” Robert shouted, racing forward — but another hound blocked his path.

Adam turned, panic freezing his limbs. “We have to—!”

A sharp, rising tone cut through the chaos — a signal, piercing and clear.

“SENTRY, GO!”

Allison’s voice.

The hacked TechRot hound launched like a bullet. A blur of machinery and rage.

Sentry hit the pack atop Marianna with terrifying force, ripping one hound clean off her and slamming it into the wall. Another turned and snarled, only to be yanked back by a whipcord of metal as Allison stepped forward, terminal device glowing violently on her wrist.

Two more hounds lunged for her.

She raised her hand, fingers twitching across the command pad.

Sentry unleashed — jaws clamping onto a target, legs a blur as he weaved through his corrupted kin, tearing them apart in a blur of violence and efficiency.

And then — silence.

The only sound left was Marianna’s ragged breathing, blood pooling under her, her clothes torn and slashed. Deep cuts marked her side, and her arm was bent wrong.

Marie was already on her knees beside her, barking orders. “Hold her still. Adam, bandages. Robert, get her coat off!”

The others moved without hesitation.

And across the clearing, the last of the TechRot hounds twitched once — then went still beneath Sentry’s feet.

Michael looked to Allison, breath catching.

She didn’t say anything. Just gave a nod and moved back toward Sentry, placing a hand gently on his side.

No one stopped her.

No one questioned her.

The fear that had clung to her like smoke was gone.

Azariah whispered, “Okay... that was badass.”

Even Michael grunted. “That thing fights better than half of us.”

Allison didn’t gloat.

She just looked toward Marianna and said quietly, “It listens. That’s the difference.”

For the first time since her arrival, the group believed her.

And as night fell over the shattered ruins, they began to move — more united than they had been in days. Because now, they knew:

Allison wasn’t just a wild card.

She was a weapon.

And she had chosen *their* side.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter XV: Rest in the Wreckage

The ruins around them whispered with wind and distant creaks, the remains of the old encampment groaning with time. After the ambush, no one had the energy to move further. They set up temporary rest near the half-intact storage room where they'd stacked their salvaged supplies.

Marianna lay bundled in scavenged cloth and jackets, bruised and bloodied but stable. Marie hovered over her with practiced calm, wrapping fresh gauze over the deeper cuts. Every so often, her eyes flicked over to Adam, sitting against a wall with Sentry, the TechRot hound, laying still at his feet.

Allison knelt beside Adam, the two of them deep in hushed conversation. A soft laugh passed between them as Adam traced a glowing line of circuitry along Sentry's collar. Their words were mostly lost to the rest of the group, save for the occasional technical phrase and the unmistakable spark of two minds clicking together.

Marie's gaze shifted again — this time toward the far side of the room.

Alex had curled up beside her instead of his usual spot near Adam. He hadn't said why. He simply dropped his blanket next to hers and quietly watched the others, silent as always.

Marie adjusted a fold of the blanket over him, then leaned slightly toward him. "You're not sleeping next to Adam tonight."

Alex didn't answer at first. He just blinked slowly, expression unreadable in the dim light.

"He's your friend," she added gently. "You talk to him more than anyone else."

"I know," Alex said finally. "He's busy. I didn't want to bother him."

Marie's lips pressed into a faint line. Her tone softened. "You're not a bother. He cares about you, even if he doesn't always show it."

Alex didn't respond again — just turned his head slightly toward the wall.

Marie sat back with a quiet sigh and glanced across the room once more. Adam and Allison were still immersed in their whispered back-and-forth, a glowing screen between them and a trail of circuit scrap sprawled on the floor.

Marie's voice was low, almost to herself now. "He doesn't even notice."

Outside, the wind brushed through the shattered fencing.

Inside, the group dozed in waves. Michael took first watch, cradling his injured arm. Robert sat with his back to a wall, knife out but hands slack. Azariah and Sage huddled nearby, whispering nonsense and trying to keep the tension at bay.

They were safe. For now.

But new bonds were forming... and others quietly shifting.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter XVI: Cold Front

The journey back to their home encampment was slow, the weight of the last few days pressing on every step. Between Marianna's injuries, dwindling supplies, and the rattling memory of the hound ambush, no one had much energy for conversation.

Even Jadrien was quiet — which Robert openly remarked was “a sign of the apocalypse in itself.”

The gate creaked open with a reluctant groan as Michael pushed it aside, his arm still bandaged but functional. Inside, the camp looked the same as they had left it — jury-rigged barricades, cobbled-together tents, and the sentinel towers Adam and Michael had built weeks ago standing like crooked watchmen.

“Still standing,” Sage muttered, clearly surprised.

“Good,” Marie said. “We need the stability.”

As they entered, people split off in instinctual rhythm — unloading gear, checking the perimeter, redistributing supplies. Allison lingered near the gate with Sentry, careful not to let the hound wander too close to the sleeping area. The others still watched it from the corner of their eyes.

Adam walked with Alex near the storage shed, but the boy offered little more than nods and one-word answers.

“You good?” Adam asked.

Alex nodded without looking up. “Fine.”

When Adam looked back, Marie was watching them from near the med tent, her expression unreadable. He raised a hand in casual greeting, but she turned and walked away.

He blinked.

“Did she just... ignore me?” he muttered under his breath.

Later, while he was rechecking the supply logs, Adam caught Marie again near the tents and tried to approach.

“Hey, you okay? You’ve been acting weird since we got back.”

She didn’t look at him as she cleaned her instruments. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“That’s... not convincing,” Adam said. “Did I screw something up?”

Silence.

He frowned, then glanced around, catching sight of Alex seated near Marie's cot, fiddling silently with a loose wire Adam had given him weeks ago.

Something tugged at the edge of Adam's mind. He stared between the two of them.

"What did I do?"

Marie looked up at him then — not angry, not bitter, just disappointed. "You were too busy to notice. That's all."

And just like that, she turned away again.

Adam stood there, unsure if he should chase the meaning or leave it alone. For once, he didn't have a blueprint or tool to fix what had cracked.

And it bothered him more than he expected.

Adam lay awake longer than usual.

The camp had gone still, save for the occasional click of Sentry's mechanical paws circling the perimeter. Most were already asleep — even Alex, curled in his blanket near Marie's tent, quietly breathing, the glow of his salvaged wire dim beside him.

But Adam's mind refused to rest.

Marie's words looped like a broken recording:

"You were too busy to notice."

He'd tried brushing it off earlier. Told himself she was just tired. Or still stressed from the TechRot ambush. But the way she looked at him — not angry, just *done* — dug deeper than he expected.

You were too busy...

Sure, he'd been focused on Allison and the hacked hound. Who wouldn't be? A reprogrammed TechRot unit was a miracle. He and Allison had shared half-whispered conversations, code-speak, laughter over corrupted logic trees. He hadn't realized that every time Alex glanced his way... he looked away again.

Adam sat up in his cot, fingers twitching restlessly. His workbench was half-disassembled from the trip. Tools lay scattered. Nothing looked right. Nothing *felt* right.

He stood and paced.

Then stopped.

Then paced again.

Talk to Marie? He tried earlier. Got iced.

Talk to Alex? The kid barely looked at him now. Used to cling to his side.

The realization hit like a wrench to the ribs:

He *had* ignored Alex. Not maliciously — just... neglected to notice. And Marie, the one who always reminded him when he missed social cues, *had* warned him. Just silently. Through absence.

Desperate for traction, Adam grabbed a few of the small projects he'd been saving — gadgets Alex had shown interest in. A folding circuit puzzle, a noise filter chip, even a toy-like robot shell he'd half-finished weeks ago.

He placed them in a small bundle. Then hovered awkwardly near Marie's tent.

Alex was already asleep.

Marie sat by a candle, writing in her scavenger log. She didn't look up.

Adam cleared his throat.

"I made him these," he said quietly. "I didn't forget. I just... I got distracted. That's not an excuse. I know it."

Still, no response.

"I care about the kid," he said. "I do. More than I knew. And I think I hurt him."

Marie looked up at that.

Adam swallowed. "Can I fix it?"

Marie stood slowly, walked over, and took the bundle from his arms.

She didn't smile. But she nodded — a small, silent gesture that told him: *You can try.*

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter XVII: Fracture Paths

Adam knew exactly when it had shifted — that moment in the ruins when Alex had curled up next to Marie instead of him. At first, he'd chalked it up to fatigue. But when Marie started offering Alex gentle encouragement and quiet attention, all while giving Adam nothing more than clipped words and narrowed eyes, it clicked.

He had ignored Alex. Pushed him aside when he needed someone. Focused too much on Sentry, too much on Allison. Too much on everything except the one person who had always trusted him.

Now, he was trying to fix it.

"Hey," Adam said as he approached Marie while she helped Sage tie down a tarp bundle. "Can we talk for a second?"

Marie gave him a short glance. "Busy."

"Sage," Adam said, turning to her. "Can I steal her for, like... a minute?"

Sage gave Marie a little nudge. "He's trying, girl. Let him."

Marie sighed but followed Adam a few steps away from the others. They stood near the edge of the clearing, the trees whispering faintly in the breeze.

"I messed up," Adam said immediately. "With Alex. With you."

Marie didn't say anything at first, arms crossed.

"I got so caught up with Sentry and the TechRot stuff, I didn't notice he needed me. That you were covering for me. And then when he chose to sleep near you, I—" He stopped, scuffing his boot against the dirt. "I deserved that."

Marie's expression softened a fraction.

"I wasn't mad because he chose me, Adam," she said. "I was mad because you didn't even seem to notice. You're usually so good with him. And when you weren't... he noticed."

"I know," Adam said quietly. "I just want to fix it."

"You're already trying," Marie replied. "Just don't forget who you are to him."

A pause. Then, finally, she added, "I'm not mad anymore. Just... disappointed. That stings more."

Adam nodded, feeling it settle in his chest. He'd take that sting over silence any day.

Back at the camp, the others were already loading up gear. Final preparations for the split had begun. Two teams. Two destinations. One uncertain future.

Robert clapped his hands. “Alright, quick rundown. Team One heads south to the new camp spot. That’s me, Sage, Marie, Marianna, and Allison. Team Two goes east to Old Junction for trading. That’s Adam, Alex, Azariah, Jadrien, and Michael.”

“Why do I get the walking weapons rack?” Jadrien groaned, glancing at Michael.

“So you don’t die,” Michael replied flatly.

Alex stood by his pack, eyes flicking toward Adam now and then, but not looking away immediately like before. There was a sliver of thaw between them.

Adam caught it—and smiled, just a bit.

Allison walked past with Sentry at her heel, already deep in a whispering debate with Sage about sensor range and terrain heatmaps. Marie fell in beside them, her usual quiet efficiency returning.

Before they split, Adam looked over once more. Marie met his eyes and gave him a small nod.

They’d be okay. Maybe not right away. But he was back on the path.

The two groups set off in opposite directions, boots crunching over dry earth. The forest swallowed them in different branches — each step forward pulling them toward different challenges, different revelations.

And maybe, if he did this right, a little bit of healing too.

The sky was overcast, casting a dull gray veil over the road ahead as Marie’s group trudged through the outskirts of what had once been a commuter town. Concrete cracked beneath their boots, vines strangled abandoned cars, and every rustling leaf kept them alert — even if today, for once, the threat wasn’t TechRot.

“Still think this place is a good candidate?” Robert asked, hefting a pack of supplies on his shoulder.

“It’s defensible,” Marie replied, eyes scanning the horizon. “There’s water access, decent sightlines. We make do.”

Marianna walked a few paces behind, chewing gum and swinging a pipe casually over her shoulder. “The real question is whether it feels right. It’s quiet — maybe too quiet.”

Allison, a few steps ahead with Sentry padding at her side, turned slightly. “I’ve run a signal sweep. No major TechRot signatures in a three-mile radius. It’s not a guarantee, but it’s promising.”

Marie didn't look at her. "Let's not start pretending we know what's 'safe' anymore."

Sage chuckled under her breath. "Burn."

Allison hesitated but said nothing. Instead, she reached down to tap a few commands into her wrist terminal. Sentry emitted a soft whir, scanning ahead.

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that thing isn't broadcasting our position?"

"No," Allison said plainly. "I'm sure it isn't."

The group continued in silence, the weight of miles and mistrust hanging between them.

After a while, Marianna fell into step beside Marie. "You gonna talk to her eventually? Or just keep freezing her out until she hacks your med kit?"

Marie's jaw tightened. "I'm not freezing her out."

Marianna gave her a look.

"She just... she hasn't earned our trust yet. Especially not mine."

"She did save your life," Sage pointed out, hands behind her head. "Or are we just forgetting the hound swarm?"

"She's useful," Marie admitted. "But that doesn't mean I need to like her. Not yet."

Allison, overhearing bits and pieces, stayed quiet. Her fingers fidgeted with a loose wire on her wrist device. She didn't look back.

The ruins up ahead finally broke into a clearing — a collapsed gas station and a half-standing motel surrounded by dead trees and gravel. It was eerie, but livable.

"This is the spot," Marie said, stopping.

They all spread out wordlessly, setting down packs and beginning preliminary sweeps. Sentry took up a guard position without being told.

Allison wandered toward the old motel wall and studied the structure's remaining integrity. "This could be reinforced. Wouldn't take much."

Marie brushed past her, measuring the wall herself with her own eyes. "We'll see."

Robert muttered to Sage, "Going to be a long few days."

Marianna just watched the interaction with a smirk. "Or a very entertaining one."

And so the setup began — with quiet steps, passive silences, and two leaders not yet ready to speak the same language.

But the camp would rise, even if the tension rose with it.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter XVIII: Wires and Words

The road to the trade camp was long and uneven — broken asphalt torn by time and tangled with roots. Their boots crunched through gravel and dry leaves as the group moved in loose formation, always alert but not as tense as they once would've been. The TechRot had been quiet lately.

Adam walked near the center, his pack lightened to make space for bartering gear — coils of copper, circuit boards, old radio chips, and a few rare tools. Every so often, he'd glance sideways at Alex, who walked beside him but kept his eyes on the small mechanical bauble in his hands — a toy Adam had made months ago, a bird-like thing with flicking wings powered by a tiny wind-up core.

"You still messing with that?" Adam finally asked, trying not to sound too eager.

Alex didn't look up, but his voice wasn't as flat as usual. "It clicks weird now. Probably a jammed spring."

Adam raised an eyebrow. "Want me to—?"

"No," Alex cut in. Then, after a pause: "I'm figuring it out."

Adam gave a quiet nod, not pushing further.

Up ahead, Michael scouted the path with his heavy shield slung over his back. Jadrien walked beside him, throwing rocks at trees and pretending he wasn't getting winded by the climb.

Behind them, Azariah walked with a relaxed swagger, flipping a coin between her fingers. She occasionally glanced back at Adam and Alex with curiosity, catching the subtle shift in their energy.

"You give him another one of your little robot puzzles?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Just an old one," Adam said.

Alex didn't respond, but he didn't pull away either — and that was something.

They took a break at a collapsed guardpost near the edge of a dried-up riverbed. The remains of a weather-worn radio dish leaned against the side like a relic from a world that had tried to reach out one last time.

Michael stood watch as Jadrien raided an old glove box for mints. Azariah lounged on a crate, flipping through a half-burned comic book she'd snagged a while back.

Adam sat with his back against the dish, watching Alex quietly fiddle with a tangle of wires and gears from another of his discarded projects. The kid's hands moved with focus, but not stress.

"I used to mess those up all the time," Adam offered gently. "Rewired one so badly it started sparking on its own."

Alex glanced at him. "Did it explode?"

Adam grinned. "Just a little. Marie banned me from building anything indoors for a month."

A faint smile tugged at Alex's mouth before he could stop it. He went back to his work without replying, but the air between them had softened. There was still a wall, but it was thinner now.

Jadrien wandered over, chewing noisily. "So. Think the traders still have those energy drinks that taste like hot battery acid? I miss those."

"No one misses those," Michael muttered from his post.

Azariah chuckled. "I kinda do. They made my heart feel like a TechRot drone."

As the group regrouped and continued their walk toward the horizon, Adam glanced at Alex again. The kid was still clutching the mechanical bird, but now he was holding it a little more carefully — like it meant something again.

They weren't fully okay.

But they were getting there.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter XIX: The Cost of Survival

The trade camp lay sprawled across the husk of an old fueling station, surrounded by stacked shipping containers and jury-rigged fencing. Canvas tarps flapped in the breeze, stitched together with logos of extinct corporations and warnings long ignored. The air was thick with smoke from barrel fires and the clamor of a dozen barterers happening all at once.

Michael's eyes swept the area immediately. "Looks stable. No signs of TechRot or ambush."

Jadrien grinned, stretching his arms over his head. "Excellent. Time to overpay for expired candy."

Adam adjusted his pack, already cataloging who he needed to talk to about parts. His gaze flicked to Alex, who walked slightly behind him, eyes wide but alert. A little overwhelmed, but steady.

A grizzled trader named Hoss, half his face hidden behind an old respirator, stood behind a table cluttered with tools, batteries, and sealed cans.

Azariah made a beeline for him. "How much for the soldering set and the solar charger?"

Hoss grunted, tapping a cracked display. "Three days' rations. Each."

Adam blinked. "That's—"

Azariah didn't wait for him to finish. "That's a ripoff, Hoss. That charger's from a first-gen ArcCorp field unit. Half the cells are probably degraded. You want three days' food for that?"

Hoss shrugged. "Still works."

"Barely." She leaned in. "I've bartered with you before. You know I know your prices."

The surrounding murmurs quieted just a notch. A few nearby traders leaned closer.

Hoss folded his arms. "Then maybe you don't buy."

Azariah didn't flinch. "Maybe I spread the word that you're swindling passersby like some desert scavver with a busted meter and a knife."

Michael's grip on his mace tightened subtly, but he didn't move. Alex hovered near Adam's side, watching with wide eyes.

Hoss's expression darkened — but only for a breath. Then he sighed. "Fine. One and a half days' worth. Take it or leave it."

Azariah flashed a small, satisfied smirk. "That's more like it."

Adam leaned to her as she handed over a bag of ration chips. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

She winked. "I'm a delight when people aren't lying to my face."

They spent the rest of the afternoon making quieter deals. Michael traded for bolts and scrap, Jadrien scored some preserved jerky, and Adam picked up a toolkit and a rare diagnostic chip, explaining its purpose to Alex in low tones.

"You ever seen one of these?" Adam asked, holding it up.

Alex inspected it. "No. What's it do?"

"Maps signal degradation across multi-line circuits. Super helpful when something won't boot but you can't find the short."

Alex pocketed the info without reply, but he didn't walk away — another small win.

As evening settled in and they found a quiet corner near the edge of the camp, Michael and Jadrien set up a small fire pit. Azariah leaned against a rusted signpost, flipping a coin lazily and watching the camp's fading activity.

"Not bad," she said. "Got what we came for, no blood spilled."

Adam glanced at Alex, who was still fiddling with the solar charger they'd picked up.

"Yeah," he said. "So far."

Chapter Twenty

Chapter XX: Static Between Signals

The clearing they'd chosen for the new encampment was tucked beneath the rusted skeleton of a transmission tower, vines strangling its frame and birds nesting in its ribs. The group worked steadily — clearing brush, setting up tarps, marking escape routes.

Allison crouched near a power terminal, examining the rusted guts of an old junction box. Her fingers moved fast, pulling wires apart with care and logging everything into her wrist interface.

A few meters away, Marie unpacked a crate of supplies with Sage and Robert, her back stiff. She kept glancing toward Allison but never said a word.

Marianna saw it.

She leaned in close, voice low and casual. "You know, I overheard something earlier. Thought you should know."

Marie raised an eyebrow but didn't pause. "What?"

"Allison," Marianna said, tossing a folded tarp onto the ground, "said something about Alex. That he's just some kid who shouldn't be messing around with tech. Something about how Adam's too soft on him."

Marie froze. "She said that?"

Marianna shrugged. "Not in those exact words. But the tone? Yeah. Pretty clear."

Marie looked toward Allison again, this time with narrowed eyes. The tech girl hadn't noticed — still engrossed in her work, humming faintly as Sentry paced nearby.

"I thought she was bonding with Adam over circuits, not trashing his friends," Marie muttered.

Marianna's lips twitched. "Just figured you'd want to know who you're working next to."

Robert called out from the edge of the camp, asking for help with a collapsing beam. Sage moved to assist, and Marianna followed — leaving Marie behind with a slow-burning spark in her chest.

She didn't confront Allison. Not yet.

But the silence grew sharper. When Allison asked Marie to hand her a tool, Marie did — but without a word. When they crossed paths by the supply pile, Marie turned away just slightly.

Allison noticed.

Later that evening, while reviewing her system logs under the fading light, she glanced toward Marie and frowned.

“She’s been quiet,” she whispered to Sentry.

The hound tilted its head but said nothing, its optic lights pulsing calmly.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter XXI: Crossed Wires

The sun had dipped below the horizon, and the camp was cloaked in violet dusk. The air buzzed softly with the static hum of Allison's rig, still pulsing faintly as she calibrated a scavenged relay antenna. Sentry sat nearby, still as stone, eyes glowing in idle standby.

Marie approached, arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

Allison looked up. "Need something?"

"I do," Marie said flatly. "I need to know what exactly you said about Alex."

Allison blinked. "What?"

"I heard you told someone he was just some kid who shouldn't be near electronics. That Adam's too soft on him."

The question hit like a short-circuit spark — small, sharp, and very real.

"I didn't say that," Allison replied, setting her tools down slowly. "Not like that."

"Then how exactly *did* you say it?" Marie asked, stepping closer. Her voice wasn't angry — not yet — but cold, like frost forming on glass.

Allison exhaled. "I said... he's *young*. That he's got potential, but it's dangerous to throw him at advanced systems without knowing how they're wired. I never said he didn't belong."

Marie's eyes narrowed. "That still sounds like you're writing him off."

"I'm not. I just don't want him getting hurt because someone gave him too much too fast," Allison said, her voice edging with frustration. "You think I don't get it? I *do*. I've been him."

Marie glanced away, jaw tight. "He's not your project. He's one of us."

"I know that." Allison stood up now, not aggressive, but matching Marie's stance. "But I don't coddle people. Especially not when the wrong mistake could set off a TechRot nest."

Sentry's head tracked the tension between them, but stayed still.

For a long moment, the silence hung.

Then Allison added, softer, "I *like* the kid. I see how he looks at Adam's work. He's smart — smarter than most adults I've met. But I'm not going to pretend everything's sunshine just to make him feel better."

Marie looked her in the eye for the first time in the conversation.

“You’re right about one thing,” she said. “He’s smart. And he hears everything. So be careful how you talk around him — because he doesn’t forget it.”

Allison nodded once, seriously. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Without another word, Marie turned and walked back toward the fire pit, where Sage and Robert were setting up watch rotations.

Allison stood still for a long moment, fingers twitching like they wanted to solder something just to burn off the heat in her chest.

Then she looked at Sentry. “Well... that went better than expected.”

The hound whined low, like it didn’t quite agree.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter XXII: The Reunion

They spotted the smoke trail first — thin, winding through the morning sky. The kind of cautious fire Marie's group would build. Adam quickened his pace, dust crunching under his boots as the others followed.

Alex trotted beside him, clutching a half-disassembled tech trinket. He'd barely spoken when they first left the trade post, but now, there was a quiet ease to his presence — like a shadow slowly curling back toward the light.

Jadrien jogged ahead, waving one arm dramatically. "Home sweet fire pit! Did you miss us?"

They crested the ridge — and there they were.

Marie's group was gathered in the new clearing: tarp tents pitched around a central campfire, half-built barricades, and a few solar panels reflecting dull sunlight. Marianna glanced up from cleaning her knife. Robert offered a nod. Marie stood near the gear piles, arms folded.

And Allison, crouched by a terminal, looked up last — her eyes flicking first to Adam, then to Alex, who had already veered closer to Adam's side, showing him the internals of the gadget in his hands.

"Did you make any friends?" Adam asked quietly, smiling as he took the piece and rotated it in the sunlight.

Alex gave a faint shrug, but didn't pull away when Adam ruffled his hair.

Sentry padded to Allison's side, but her focus had shifted. The subtle curve in her brow, the way she watched Adam and Alex with distant calculation — it wasn't jealousy. But it wasn't warmth either.

"You're late," Marie said, walking over.

"We had to argue Azariah out of committing trade fraud," Adam replied. "You know. The usual."

Marie almost smiled — but it faded fast. "We've had our own excitement."

Adam studied her face. The coolness was still there. Not as sharp, but present.

"What happened?" he asked.

She glanced toward Allison. "Marianna stirred the pot. I had to clean it up."

Adam followed her gaze. Allison didn't look up again — not until Marie walked away. Then, just for a moment, their eyes met. Clearly she wasn't the most thrilled with the situation.

“Helpful,” Adam muttered, but his tone was more amused than upset.

They moved to unload supplies, but the undercurrent was impossible to ignore.

Something had changed.

Alex sat beside Adam as the fire crackled that night, not flinching when their shoulders brushed. Jadrien and Michael bickered over watch duty. Azariah told a ridiculous story about the trade camp.

And across the flames, Allison sat alone, tinkering — but her gaze lingered on Adam and Alex more than the circuits in her hand.

The camp was whole again.

But unity didn’t mean peace.

Not yet.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter XXIII: The Wrong Words

The morning haze clung low to the treeline, casting the camp in muted gold. Birds called somewhere distant, and Sentry paced the perimeter like clockwork. Most of the group was still half-asleep, stirring in tents or boiling water for rationed tea.

Adam wasn't.

He was scanning the camp for one person.

Marianna.

She sat on a fallen log near the gear tarp, polishing the edge of her machete with the kind of casual focus that always made Adam second-guess approaching her. But not today.

"Hey," he said, voice low but firm.

Marianna looked up, eyes narrowing slightly at his tone. "Sup, Circuit Boy?"

Adam ignored the nickname. "I want to know exactly what Allison said about Alex."

She raised a brow. "You gonna ask her yourself?"

"I'm asking you first," he replied, sharper than he meant to be.

Marianna leaned back. "She said — and I quote — 'He's just a kid. Probably better off away from electronics until he's older and doesn't fry anything important.'"

Adam's jaw tensed.

"That's it?" he asked, though his voice was already cold.

Marianna gave a half-smirk. "You wanted honesty. That's what I heard."

He stood there for a moment, silent. Then turned on his heel and walked off — fast.

Back at the fire pit, Alex was hunched over a dismantled drone shell, carefully soldering wires Adam had shown him last night. Focused. Proud. Like he finally felt he belonged.

Adam's fists clenched at his sides.

Allison thought *that*?

He'd trusted her. Shared notes. Let her see the inner workings of his world — and she thought Alex wasn't ready?

A flicker of anger coiled in his chest, tighter than he expected. Not just because of the comment. But because it made him question everything. How much of their “nerding out” was genuine? How much of it had been laced with that subtle condescension?

He looked across the camp. Allison was at the solar node, tuning Sentry’s feedback loop. She hadn’t noticed him. Or maybe she was pretending not to.

“Coward,” he muttered under his breath.

Marie passed by, offering a glance that said she noticed his mood — but didn’t comment.

Not yet.

Because something had shifted. In Adam. In how he saw Allison. And whether she realized it or not, she’d just put herself on the wrong side of something important.

Alex deserved better than to be underestimated.

And Adam wasn’t going to forget it.

The sun filtered through the canopy, dappled light falling in fractured beams. The camp was quieter than usual, not in an uncomfortable way, but in a way that made the smallest sounds feel sharper. The crackle of the fire, the soft whir of a tool being adjusted, the faint hum of Sentry’s systems running diagnostics.

Marie sat near the fire, her fingers absently working on the stitching of a torn jacket. Her eyes flicked between the others, every now and then narrowing when she caught a glimpse of Allison.

Allison was hunched over a small terminal near the corner of camp, her fingers moving quickly across the worn keys. The sound of her typing was the only thing breaking the otherwise tranquil rhythm of the morning. She didn’t notice Marie watching her at first.

Marianna had already noticed, though. She was sitting at the opposite end of the fire, sharpening her knife with rhythmic precision. Her eyes flicked to Marie, and the tension between the two of them was something no one could ignore, not even the sharpness of the blade. She had no intention of stopping her work, but her mind was elsewhere, focused on something more troubling.

Finally, after a long, uncomfortable pause, Marie broke the silence. “I’ve been thinking about the next steps. We can’t stay here forever.”

Marianna’s gaze shifted toward her. “Where’s your head at?” she asked casually, though the slightest curve of a smirk betrayed her interest.

Marie didn't immediately respond. Instead, she glanced again at Allison. Then, as if weighed by an invisible pressure, she finally spoke, "I don't know. Maybe we keep moving, maybe we set something more permanent. But I don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past."

Marianna's tone softened. "What mistakes?"

"Leaving everything behind for something that ends up not being what we thought it was."

It was as if the air around them thickened. Both women, caught in the same uncertainty about their future, were careful not to glance at the small pile of things they had left behind when they moved to this camp—pieces of their past lives, lost bits of hope. They hadn't talked much about it.

Across the camp, Allison continued her work, though a subtle shift had occurred. She was aware, too aware, of the distance that was starting to grow around her. The sharp looks, the soft conversations that went quiet when she approached. Adam had grown more distant in the past few days, and with him, the rest of the group seemed to subtly follow suit.

She didn't blame him. She had known it was coming. Her own line of work, her hacking, always made her the outlier. The thing she had done for so long—controlling the TechRot, understanding its very heartbeat—had only ever been a way of survival. But it felt like she was pushing the group away rather than drawing them in.

Her hands paused over the terminal, and she rubbed her eyes tiredly, looking up at the camp.

Marie caught the shift in her posture, and she could almost feel the unspoken tension hanging between them. Her mouth opened as if she was going to say something, but her voice caught. She felt it, too, but wasn't ready to acknowledge it, not yet. Not until it was necessary.

Marianna was the first to break the spell, though not in a way that would ease anything. "You know," she began, as if the words just came naturally, "Allison's the kind of person who'll make you think you can trust her, then turn around and leave you in the dirt."

Marie didn't flinch, but the weight of Marianna's words hit harder than expected. She cast her eyes toward Allison, who was still working quietly, engrossed in her world.

"Is that what you think?" Marie asked, her voice softer than it had been moments ago, betraying a hint of vulnerability.

Marianna didn't back down. "It's a possibility. She keeps to herself. And you know, that doesn't exactly scream 'team player.'"

There was a pause before Marie replied, choosing her words carefully. "I'm not sure that's fair."

"Does it matter?" Marianna shot back, a little sharper than before. "We're out here, surviving. And some people... they're not cut out for it. She's definitely different."

But as she said it, she could see the way Allison's shoulders tightened, just a fraction. She had seen the way Adam had been quieter around her, the way Alex had gravitated away, just the slightest change in their patterns.

It was enough to make her stop, though not for long. Marianna knew what she had done — had started — but the real question was whether Marie had seen it for what it was: a crack.

Allison glanced up, catching their gaze for just a moment. But before either could say anything, she looked away, her focus returning to her work.

The silence between the three of them grew heavier, no words needed to continue the dance. The tension remained unresolved.

By the time the sun began to dip lower in the sky, the moment passed, just like every other. There was no confrontation, no outburst. Just the weight of unspoken thoughts, left hanging in the air.

And as the camp began to settle in for the night, even the quiet sound of the fire felt different. As if it, too, could sense the shift.

Adam hadn't spoken to her yet, and Allison could feel it. The weight of those days pulling her down.

But she kept quiet. No use in breaking what was still fragile.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter XXIV: Ashes in the Wires

Morning broke soft and gold across the clearing, filtering through patchy canvas and makeshift tarps. For once, there was no rush. No scouting calls. No alarm. Just the steady crackle of the fire and the low murmur of a group finding breath between storms.

Alex sat cross-legged by a flat stone, a half-finished drone piece in his lap. Adam knelt beside him, adjusting a calibration node.

“Try switching polarity here,” Adam murmured, passing over a tool.

Alex nodded, quiet but focused. His movements were less hesitant now — not yet fluid, but sure. He didn’t flinch when Adam’s hand brushed his to guide a connection point.

Across camp, Robert sharpened a blade with rhythmic scrapes. Sage and Michael traded jokes between bites of stale protein bars. Azariah had wandered off toward the treeline to pick through berries and mutter about terrible foraging luck. Jadrien was constructing something that was definitely not regulation out of scrap metal and an old pot.

Allison worked alone near the generator, face buried in her data pad, fingers moving in sharp, practiced swipes. She didn’t look up when Adam passed by with Alex, though her gaze flickered toward them more than once.

Marie and Marianna were reinforcing the perimeter, the silence between them slightly too long, their teamwork slightly too practiced.

And then... a sound.

Faint at first — like wind through cracked glass.

Alex’s head lifted. Adam froze mid-step.

A shimmer at the far end of the woods. Just past the treeline, a flicker of movement — too fast, too low.

Then the silence broke.

A shriek, mechanical and wrong, tore through the air.

“Positions!” Michael bellowed, but it was too late.

The TechRot burst through the treeline in a black tide of glistening metal and twitching limbs — not just hounds, but malformed crawlers and bone-jointed stalkers. Sparks shot from their jaws. Viral tubing pulsed like veins.

Chaos erupted.

Marianna cried out — tackled mid-run by one of the hounds. Robert charged, blade drawn. Sage was already dragging her back by the collar, swearing.

Allison shouted something — a command to Sentry, who tore into one of the attackers with a brutal snap. But they kept coming.

Alex froze. Then Adam was in front of him — shield up, a cracked emitter flaring to life in his hand.

"Stay behind me!" he yelled.

Alex obeyed, heart pounding.

One of the TechRot lunged. Adam's device discharged, frying the beast in mid-air — but the shockwave flung him back, hard into the dirt.

Smoke, sparks, screaming—

Another shape lunged toward Alex.

Adam was already moving again, blood down one arm, pushing Alex behind a supply crate as the camp burned around them.

Then the generator exploded.

And the world went white.

The world came back in fragments.

A cough. A groan. The sting of smoke in the lungs. A sharp, burning ache in muscles that didn't remember how they'd gotten twisted.

Adam opened his eyes to pale morning light filtered through smoke and ash. The camp was unrecognizable — tents shredded, barricades collapsed, the solar rig a crumpled ruin of glass and sparking wire.

Beside him, Alex stirred. Unharmed.

Adam blinked. It took him a full minute to remember why.

The memory hit like a hammer: the shriek of corrupted hounds, the hum of infected drones, the world flashing blue and green with viral circuitry as the TechRot poured through the trees. Alex had frozen. Adam had pulled him down, covered him with his body, shielding him from the worst of it.

"Hey," Adam whispered hoarsely. "You okay?"

Alex nodded faintly, staring at the devastation around them.

Then the calls started.

"Is everyone alive?" That was Robert's voice — hoarse and low, but still strong.

"Roll call!" Sage shouted next, her arm pressed tightly to a deep gash across her ribs. Marianna limped into view behind her, blood trailing down her leg. Michael was propped against a shattered wall, breathing hard but upright.

Marie emerged from behind a collapsed tent, coughing and waving away the smoke. She helped Jadrien to his feet — his usual humor stripped away, replaced by silent grimacing as he clutched a broken wrist.

Allison was already standing near the center of camp, visibly shaken but physically unharmed. Sentry paced around her, its metal frame scraped and smoldering in places, tail twitching anxiously.

"Bandages. Water. Start triage," Marie barked, taking over without hesitation. "Check for compression wounds, crush injuries—Adam, take Alex and find the emergency kit from the old med tent."

Adam nodded, helping Alex up before breaking into a jog. The ground crunched beneath him — shattered glass, scorched tools, bent support beams. What wasn't destroyed had been melted or corrupted.

The emergency kit was half-buried under collapsed tarps. He dug it out, handed Alex the iodine and gauze, and rushed back to the others.

Time blurred. They cleaned cuts, splinted limbs, wrapped wounds. Marianna hissed as Robert tied a bandage over her shredded side. Sage sat in silence, her knuckles white as she stitched her own arm. Marie tied a torn shirt around Michael's leg, whispering steady reassurances. Adam did what he could to keep Alex close and focused — every minute that passed, more tension flooded his chest.

And through it all, Allison said nothing.

Not until the fires were out and the worst bleeding had stopped.

Marie straightened, brushing ash off her hands. She turned toward Allison, jaw tight.

"You said you were running scans," she said flatly.

Allison, sitting against a still-standing slab of wall, looked up. Her face was pale.

"I was."

“Then how the hell did we get ambushed this badly?” Robert asked, stepping forward. “You said the signal field was clean.”

“I—” Allison faltered. “It *was*. The scans came up blank. I run them constantly. There was no activity within five clicks. Nothing.”

“Well something changed,” Marianna snapped, clutching her side. “They came straight through our defenses like they knew exactly where we were.”

Allison looked stunned, genuinely unsure what to say. “I don’t know. I swear I didn’t see them.”

“Didn’t see them, or didn’t say anything?” Marie’s voice cut like ice. “Because there’s a difference.”

Silence.

Allison opened her mouth — and closed it again.

Sentry whined softly beside her, ears twitching.

Adam watched from the edge of the circle, hands clenched. He didn’t speak. But the distance he’d started to put between himself and Allison now felt heavier.

Alex, still by his side, looked from face to face. No one trusted each other right now.

And with the camp destroyed, injuries weighing on every step, and the forest beyond them silent once again...

They had bigger problems.

But trust — once fractured — was the hardest to rebuild.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter XXV: Fractures

The air reeked of ash and ozone.

Robert and Michael heaved away the twisted sheet of solar paneling, their hands slick with blood and sweat. Beneath it lay what they were searching for — and dreading.

Azariah's arm was the first thing they saw. Then her shoulder. Then the rest.

Crushed. Lifeless.

Marianna gasped, a sound too sharp to be anything but pain. She dropped to her knees beside the wreckage, her fingers trembling as they reached for a hand that would never grip back. “No,” she whispered, then louder, “No—no, she was *just* talking to me!”

Sage stumbled forward, pale and wide-eyed. “She was on watch last night. She—she was supposed to call out...”

Marie stood still, unmoving, as if frozen between breaths. Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came. Her eyes just started — locked on the sight in front of her, refusing to blink.

Robert looked away.

The firelight flickered over them, casting long, broken shadows across the ruins of the camp.

And then Sage turned.

“She was supposed to be safe. We were *all* supposed to be safe.”

All eyes slowly fell on one person.

Allison.

She stood a few paces back, her goggles slung around her neck, her terminal still clutched in one hand. Sentry paced nervously beside her, sensing the shift in mood.

“You said you were running scans,” Sage hissed. “You told us you had TechRot detection on a loop!”

“I—I did,” Allison said, voice small.

“Then *how* did they get in?” Marianna snapped, red-eyed and shaking. “Why didn’t you *say anything?!?*”

Allison opened her mouth, but nothing came. No defense. No excuse. Just silence.

Marie stepped forward. Her voice didn't rise — it didn't need to.

"You said we were clear. You said we could rest."

Allison's breathing hitched. Her fingers twitched at her side.

"I missed it," she finally whispered. "I—I thought I had time to recalibrate. I thought..."

Her gaze dropped to the dirt. Tears welled in her eyes, blurring the soot and blood on her cheeks. "I wasn't good enough."

The words were barely audible. A confession. A verdict. A sentence passed by her own mind.

She turned away from the others, shoulders trembling. Sentry whined low, brushing up against her leg, but she didn't acknowledge him. Her world had narrowed — to guilt, to failure, to the sight of Azariah's crushed body now etched into her memory forever.

Alex watched from the edge of the camp.

He hadn't moved much since the attack — just sat, knees drawn to his chest, watching the people who once felt invincible crack and fall apart.

Azariah was dead. Not injured. *Gone*.

He didn't understand why it felt like the world had changed shape around that fact. He hadn't known her well. She was loud, fierce, always challenging others. But she had never made him feel small.

Now, everyone felt small.

He glanced to Adam — arms bloodied and eyes sunken from lack of sleep and worry. He'd held Alex through the worst of it, shielding him when the hounds surged in. He had chosen to protect *him*.

And yet, Alex could see the weight in Adam's posture now. How his shoulders hunched, how his eyes flicked toward Allison with something dark behind them.

Alex looked at Allison again.

She wasn't yelling. She wasn't arguing. She just... looked broken.

And Alex knew that feeling.

He remembered nights spent alone after his parents vanished. The guilt of being left behind. The uselessness. The silence.

And now she was inside that silence too.

He didn't move toward her.

He didn't move toward anyone.

He just sat still, a quiet shadow in the wreckage, watching the people he had just started to trust begin to tear themselves apart.

The camp was a ruin of ash and silence.

Smoke drifted in lazy sheets through the shattered ruins of their newest shelter. The morning light did nothing to warm the shattered earth or the broken spirits of those still standing. Bandages, splints, and the scent of cauterized wounds lingered in the air. No one spoke unless they had to.

Except now.

Marie stood, her voice raw from tears and shouting the night before. "You said you were scanning. You said we were safe."

Allison didn't speak. She hadn't spoken since they found Azariah — her crushed form pinned beneath a collapsed solar beam, fingers stretched out as if reaching for someone.

Robert's voice was tight. "It wasn't just a mistake. It was negligence."

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Allison finally whispered. Her throat was dry. "I did everything right—"

"Then how did they get in?" Marianna snapped. Her eyes were red, rage swimming in them. "You were supposed to be the one thing we could rely on. You and your 'tamed hound.'"

Sentry whined low, nudging against Allison's leg.

Sage sat against a wall, holding a torn piece of Azariah's old cloak. "We lost her because we trusted you. And you didn't warn us."

Adam didn't speak.

He stood off to the side, arm in a makeshift sling, eyes hollow. He couldn't even look in Allison's direction. Not once.

That was what crushed her the most.

Not the blame.

Not even the pain.

But the silence from the one person who always saw the code behind the chaos. Who had once said they were alike — curious minds in a world trying to kill them both.

He wouldn't even *look* at her.

Allison's voice trembled. "You think I don't know I failed?"

"Then do the one thing you're good at," Marie said coldly. "Walk away."

Allison's lips parted. Her gaze darted from face to face, but there was no refuge in any of them.

Not in Robert's cold stare.

Not in Marianna's fury.

Not in Marie's quiet, final judgment.

And not in Adam.

Especially not in Adam.

She picked up her bag slowly. Sentry stood the moment she did.

The group watched her go, no one moving to stop her.

Only Alex watched from the side of the camp, small and silent, his arms wrapped around his knees. He didn't fully understand the lines being drawn — only that someone had fallen out of favor, and no one wanted to catch her.

He watched as Allison disappeared into the trees with her hound.

He watched until she was gone.

And still, Adam never looked up.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter XXVI: The Long Walk

They buried Azariah at first light.

No speeches. No final words. Just silence, shovels, and the wind.

Her grave sat beneath a bent pine at the edge of the ruined camp. Michael carved her name into a rusted sheet of siding they salvaged from the wreckage. It wasn't enough. Nothing would be.

But the world never paused long for grief.

The air still tasted like ash when Jadrien spoke up, his usual grin nowhere in sight.

"There's a place," he said, voice scratchy. "Old farmland out past the dead zone. Open plains, high ground. No TechRot nests. I camped there once with some scavengers—years ago."

Robert looked skeptical. "And you remember how to get there?"

"Yeah. Sort of. Mostly." Jadrien scratched the back of his neck. "I was conscious for, like, 70% of the trip."

Despite everything, a few people gave tired smiles. Even that felt like a small miracle.

"We can't stay here," Marie said, tightening her pack with a wince. Her ribs were still healing, but she didn't complain. "We don't have a choice."

One by one, the others nodded.

Michael's leg was stiff and wrapped tight. Sage walked slower than usual, her shoulder half-immobile. Marianna's hands were raw and bandaged. Marie had only just stopped coughing blood.

They were wounded. Broken in places. But not beaten.

Alex walked close to Adam, still quiet but never far from his side. He had taken on small responsibilities without being asked — fetching water, packing medical supplies, helping Sage adjust her sling.

They moved slowly. Every step burned. But together, they lifted what supplies they had left, doused the fires, and left the ruins of the encampment behind.

By midday, they were trudging across the outskirts of the charred woodland, the last remnants of their shelter vanishing behind them in the smoke-stained horizon.

Robert led with a makeshift spear. Jadrien gave directions between breaths, pausing every so often to let them rest and check the path.

Michael carried two packs when Marianna couldn't keep hers upright.

Even Marie — bruised and slow — never stopped moving.

They crossed dry creeks, stepped over roots and bones, moved through thickets laced with silent rot. No one spoke of Allison. No one spoke much at all.

The sun dipped lower.

That night, they camped beneath a dead billboard listing evacuation routes no longer followed. The air was cold and sharp, and every cough echoed.

But they were alive.

Still walking.

Still fighting.

And somewhere ahead, past the miles of pain and smoke, was a place they could start over.

A place that had to be safer.

A place to rebuild.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter XXVI: A Quiet Conversation

The third day of walking brought a lull. The open plains were still distant, but the trees had thinned and the ground had begun to flatten beneath their boots.

They camped near the remains of an overgrown gas station, nothing left but a shattered sign and a rusted-out pump tangled in vines. The air was clearer here, and the silence wasn't as suffocating.

Adam sat a little apart from the others, arms resting on his knees, watching the fire flicker low. His wounds still ached beneath the bandages, and the weight in his chest — the grief, the guilt — pressed heavier than the pack on his shoulders.

Beside him, Alex toyed with a bit of circuitry pulled from one of his scavenged trinkets. He was cross-legged, the flickering firelight catching in his dark hair. Every so often, he glanced up toward the group, then back to his little project.

Adam broke the silence with a quiet voice.

"You ever think about before all this?"

Alex didn't look up. "Sometimes."

Adam watched the boy for a moment. "Do you remember much?"

Alex was quiet, then gave a small shrug. "A little. My parents... they died when I was five. We lived in an apartment over a pharmacy. They lasted through the first five years. I guess that's something."

Adam nodded slowly. "That's... young. I'm sorry."

Alex didn't look sad. Not exactly. His hands moved with mechanical focus as he twisted a wire into place.

"I lived in the shopping district for a while after that. Hid in vents. Ate out of vending machines until the power died. Learned how to stay out of sight."

He paused, eyes flicking toward the fire where the others were scattered — Sage asleep against Marianna's shoulder, Robert snoring softly, Marie curled in her blankets with a hand still wrapped tight around a blade.

"Then I found you all," Alex said simply.

Adam turned to look at him. "Do you miss it? Before?"

Alex finally looked up. There was a calmness to his face, like someone who had already grieved long ago.

“No. Not really. That wasn’t a life. This is... better.”

Adam raised a brow. “Even now? After everything?”

Alex gave a faint, crooked smile. “This is my family now. It’s a little broken. Sure. But it’s good. Very good, actually.”

Adam let the silence stretch again, warm and soft. He blinked away the sting behind his eyes.

“You’re part of this, Alex,” he said quietly. “Family, like you said.”

Alex nodded, looking back down to his trinket. “I know.”

And in that moment, under the stars and the broken moon, Adam felt just a little lighter.

The pain was still there — in his muscles, in his mind, in the empty place where Azariah used to laugh — but for now, he let it rest.

Because the family was still here.

Not whole.

Not healed.

But still walking.

Still fighting.

Still together.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter XXVIII: *Ashes by the River*

The journey had taken the better part of two days.

Injured, exhausted, and grieving, the group trudged across miles of broken land. The trail Jadrien remembered was overgrown and scattered with TechRot debris, but the plains beyond were real — flat, open, and quiet.

And then they saw it.

The river.

A long, winding ribbon of water glinted beneath the afternoon sun, cutting through the tall grass like a vein of silver. It was shallow and calm, flanked by old tree stumps and the remnants of a shattered bridge. But it meant life. Clean water. A defensible place. And maybe, just maybe, a future.

“There,” Jadrien said, pointing, breathless. “Told you this place existed.”

Nobody had the energy to answer. They simply moved.

By the time they reached the spot — a gentle rise near the riverbank with a wide enough clearing to see in all directions — some of them collapsed on the ground. Marianna fell to her knees. Robert immediately began surveying for cover. Sage limped over to the edge of the river and dunked her hands into the water, trembling.

Marie stayed standing. Looking. Making sure this wasn’t just another place they’d die in.

They set up slowly. Tarp tents. Cracked crates. Solar scraps. They had salvaged what they could during the retreat from the ruins, but it wasn’t much. No one had slept properly since the attack. Azariah’s name hadn’t been spoken aloud once.

Michael stacked stones around a half-built firepit, working in silence. Occasionally he’d glance over to the others to make sure they were still upright.

Alex didn’t sit once. He moved from person to person, dragging poles, handing out bandages, adjusting canvas ties. The kid was barely ten, but he was keeping more than just himself together.

“Careful,” Marie called out when he nearly tripped while carrying Robert’s medkit. “You’re not invincible.”

“I know,” Alex replied, breathless. But he kept moving.

Adam knelt by the river, elbows deep in pipes and wiring, assembling a makeshift filtration system from the scavenged debris. His hands were blistered, lips dry. But he hadn't stopped since they arrived. Not for food. Not for water.

Marie approached cautiously. "You need rest."

"I will. Later."

"Adam—"

"I said I will," he snapped, just a little too sharply. Then paused. "Sorry. I just... I need to finish this."

Marie watched him a moment longer, lips pressed into a tight line. Then she turned and walked away.

Marianna kept her distance from the others, sitting against a tree trunk with her leg stretched out in its brace, chewing the inside of her cheek. She didn't say much. None of them did.

Michael walked between supply piles and helped Jadrien reinforce the outer perimeter with broken sheet metal. Their movements were stiff — automatic.

As dusk settled over the plains, the camp flickered to life under the pink sky. Smoke curled from the first small fire. The filtration system gurgled faintly, spitting clean water into a salvaged jug.

Adam sat beside it, wiping sweat from his brow. His body was still, but his eyes remained wide open. Haunted.

Alex sat down next to him, cradling a cracked gear casing Adam had once given him.

"You think it'll work?" Alex asked softly, nodding toward the filter.

"It'll hold for now," Adam said. "Might have to change the flow line tomorrow."

Alex didn't answer at first. Then: "This place feels better. Doesn't feel... cursed."

Adam looked at him. "You've always been better at seeing things clearly."

Alex offered a small smile. "Maybe."

The fire crackled. Tents rustled in the breeze. Jadrien and Michael bickered about whether the solar panel could be angled better, while Robert quietly inventoried their remaining food.

The group was whole again.

But only by number.

And only for now.

The wind moved slow across the plains. Wide, open sky stretched overhead — too blue, too calm. It made the pain feel heavier, like it didn't belong here.

Marianna sat near the edge of camp, her leg stretched out and wrapped in scavenged cloth, stiff with dried blood. She'd refused to let anyone dress the wound at first. Pride. Or maybe guilt. It was hard to tell which was heavier.

The grass whispered as it bent in the breeze. She could hear Robert and Sage trying to rig the tarp shelters again after they collapsed the third time. Michael was hauling solar cells to a better angle with Jadrien yelling useless instructions beside him. Even Alex was moving from one group to another, quietly checking if people needed help.

Adam was down at the river, hammering metal and muttering to himself. Marie had stopped trying to get him to rest.

Marianna leaned back and let the sun hit her face. Her skin hurt in patches, like it had forgotten how to be whole. She reached for her knife out of habit — but her fingers paused. She didn't unsheath it. Just held it in her lap, thumb brushing the hilt.

She hadn't cried. Not when the base collapsed. Not when they found Azariah.

The screaming had been enough. Sage's voice breaking, Marie sinking to her knees, even Jadrien going still for once. And Allison — gone.

Marianna didn't miss her. Not really. But there was something ugly about the way the others had turned on her. Like they needed someone to bleed for their failure.

And yet... Marianna hadn't stopped it either. She'd led it, hadn't she?

She pressed the knife handle harder into her palm.

The wind brought the sound of water from the river. Calming. Steady. Like the world didn't care what they'd lost.

Her eyes drifted closed for a moment. In the dark behind her lids, she saw claws again. Heard the metal shriek of the hounds. Felt their weight crush down on her, tear into her shoulder, rip the breath from her lungs. She gasped — not out loud. Just sharp enough for her own ribs to feel it.

A footstep.

She opened her eyes. Sage stood a few feet away, holding a bandage roll. She didn't say anything — just offered it.

Marianna nodded once. A silent truce. Sage sat beside her.

They didn't talk. Just listened to the river and the far-off calls of birds that hadn't left this part of the world.

She didn't know what tomorrow would look like.

But today, she was still breathing. And maybe that counted for something.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter XXIX: What Remains Beneath

The fire had burned low. Morning hadn't yet come, but the sky hinted at it — bruised violet, stretched thin over a still-shattered world. Most of the group was either asleep or pretending to be.

Marianna sat near the outer edge of the clearing, a faded blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her wounds — stitched and bandaged — ached beneath the gauze, but that wasn't what kept her awake. It was the silence. The kind that didn't feel peaceful. The kind that whispered of ghosts.

Sage approached slowly, carrying two tin cups of half-warm broth. He didn't say anything at first, just sat beside her and offered one. She took it without looking at him.

"You shouldn't be up," she said after a moment.

"Neither should you," Sage replied.

A pause. Then Marianna gave a dry, mirthless chuckle. "I guess that's fair."

They drank quietly. The river's soft rush nearby was the only sound. After a while, Sage set his cup down and looked out over the dim shapes of the camp — tents, supplies, collapsed equipment. Broken people, in broken silence.

"You ever think," he said carefully, "that maybe surviving isn't the same as healing?"

Marianna didn't answer at first. Her eyes were locked on the dark, distant edge of the trees. "All the time."

Sage nodded. "We all lost something back there. Azariah... she was like gravity. Kept things grounded."

Marianna's fingers tightened around her cup. "She was better than most of us."

"No," Sage said quietly. "She was just willing to carry more than she should have."

Silence again. The wind stirred the grass, brushing softly against their boots.

"I wanted to blame someone," Marianna admitted. "Allison was easy. Still is, maybe. But I... I keep asking myself if I would've done better."

"You did what you could," Sage said.

Marianna's voice cracked, softer than before. "What if that's not enough anymore?"

Sage looked at her, expression unreadable. Then, gently, he placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Then we carry what we can. And we keep walking.”

For the first time in hours, Marianna let herself lean — just slightly — into the presence of another person.

The sky lightened above them, one pale line of gold on the horizon.

The camp was quiet, the air heavy with unspoken grief and shared exhaustion. The sky above, though clouded with gray, felt like a thin barrier between the present and something more distant — a reminder of the chaos that had torn through their lives. Adam was still working, as always, isolated in his focus. The others, scattered around the camp, had found some reprieve from the chaos.

But it was time for a different kind of conversation.

The sound of boots crunching on gravel drew Michael, Robert, and Jadrien together near the fire. The light flickered, casting long shadows on their faces. It was rare for the three of them to sit together without the women or the younger ones around.

Michael broke the silence first, his voice rough. “You ever think about how much we’ve lost?”

Robert shifted on the log he sat on. His eyes stared out at the remnants of their camp, where the new base had yet to settle. “Every damn day.”

Jadrien, always the lighter one, tried to keep it casual. “What’s the point in dwelling on it, though? We’ve still got each other, right?”

Michael snorted. “That doesn’t make the loss hurt any less. That’s the problem. You start seeing people as family... and then the worst happens. Look at us.” He gestured toward the silent figures around them.

Robert was quieter, thoughtful. “We can’t afford to pretend it’s all okay. We’ve been through hell. People are... broken.” He glanced at the ground, his hand absently tracing the outline of a broken circuit board. “I’m not talking about just the bodies. It’s the rest of us. The parts of us that’ll never come back.”

Jadrien shifted uncomfortably, his voice softer. “I don’t think we can fix things. Not all of them.” He looked toward Adam, working with the filtration system. “But we’re still here. We’re still fighting. That’s something.”

Michael nodded slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not enough, though, is it? The loss... it’s there. Azariah’s gone, and we’ll never get her back. But even if we stay alive, it won’t ever feel the same.”

Robert clenched his fists, standing up abruptly. “None of this is fair! But I’m sick of being stuck in the past. We can’t change it, but we’re still here, and that matters.”

There was a moment of silence, the fire crackling as they all took in the weight of Robert's words. Slowly, Michael spoke again, his voice quieter this time. "I'm not saying we can't keep going. I'm just saying... we've gotta acknowledge the scars. We can't pretend they don't exist."

Jadrien's expression softened. "Yeah. Maybe we need to talk about it. Talk about everything that's happened. It's been a hell of a lot."

Robert nodded, the weight in his eyes returning. "We've all lost something. We're gonna have to carry that weight for a while."

For a moment, the three of them sat in quiet reflection, the heaviness of their shared grief settling between them.

Jadrien looked up, his face a little lighter now, a small smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "Well, we can at least keep each other sane. That's something. We might be a little broken, but we're not completely done for, right?"

Michael gave a faint smile, the kind of small comfort that didn't make everything okay but acknowledged that they were, in some way, still connected. "Yeah. We've got each other." He paused, glancing at Robert. "For whatever that's worth."

Robert cracked a tired smile. "It's worth a hell of a lot more than we thought. But that doesn't mean it's easy."

Jadrien let out a breath, still trying to keep the atmosphere light. "Guess we've got a long road ahead, huh?"

The conversation dwindled into a comfortable silence. They had been through enough for a lifetime, but maybe, just maybe, they would make it through the next day. Together.

Chapter Thirty

Chapter XXX: *Stories in the Ashes*

The sun was nearly gone, a red smear dragging itself beneath the horizon as dusk settled over the plains.

They didn't speak much as they worked. Adam moved from station to station, checking what little structure they'd managed to piece together — a few lean-tos, a couple of tarps held down by salvaged scrap, and the beginnings of a fire ring. It was rough. But it was something.

Robert gathered kindling in silence, his shoulders stiff. Every time he bent to collect a piece, his breath caught — a reminder of the bruised ribs under his jacket. Michael stood near the edge of the camp, staring out across the flat stretch of land, the distant river glinting under the fading sky. He hadn't said much in days.

Alex helped Jadrien build the fire, stacking dry sticks in a crisscrossed pile. His hands moved with care, brow furrowed in concentration. Jadrien, unusually subdued, didn't crack a single joke. Not yet.

Marianna sat nearby with Marie, still wrapping her arm in a cleaner bandage. Neither said much. The ache in their limbs, the weight behind their eyes — it said enough.

When the first spark caught, the crackle of flames filled the stillness. A tiny heartbeat in the vast, hollow quiet.

They all drifted toward it eventually, one by one, like moths toward something warm and familiar.

Adam sat last, beside Alex — not close enough to touch, but close enough to feel the heat between them. Everyone was there now, circled around the flame, shadows flickering across their tired faces. The wind rustled dry grass around them, the scent of smoke curling into the air.

For a long moment, they simply listened. To the fire. To the wind. To their own silence.

Then Jadrien leaned back, arms crossed behind his head, and said, "Remember when we used to sneak into that wrecked arcade just to see if we could power the skee-ball machine with a bike generator?"

Michael let out a short laugh — the first sound from him all day. "You rigged it so it spat out tickets nonstop. We buried that place in paper."

Robert smiled faintly. "Didn't even use the tickets. Just liked the sound."

Marie exhaled through her nose. "I remember that day. Alex had just found that broken joystick and carried it around for a week like it was some kind of treasure."

Alex shrugged, clearly remembering. "It was a treasure."

They chuckled — quiet, tired laughter. But real.

Marianna stirred, the flames dancing in her eyes. “There were moments, weren’t there? Even with everything burning... there were days it didn’t feel like the world had ended.”

Jadrien nodded. “We were kids playing apocalypse.”

“No,” Robert murmured. “We were surviving it. That’s not the same.”

A silence followed. Heavy. But not cold.

Sparks floated upward, drifting into the dusk like ghosts.

Adam glanced across the fire at each of them. He saw it — the exhaustion, the grief — but also something else. A memory of connection. Of days when their hearts hadn’t felt so raw.

“It wasn’t all bad,” Michael said, his voice quiet. “There were moments that made it worth waking up. Even if they’re gone now.”

“They’re not all gone,” Alex said, and for the first time, his voice didn’t sound so small.

They looked at him. And then at each other.

Maybe they weren’t whole anymore. Maybe they never would be again. But here, around this fire, with bruises not yet faded and wounds still healing — they weren’t alone.

And maybe that was enough.

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter XXXI: A Man on the Road

The morning mist clung low across the cracked asphalt, curling like breath over forgotten road signs and scorched grass. Adam adjusted the straps on his pack as he walked ahead, flanked by Robert and Michael. None of them spoke much — not because there was nothing to say, but because everything already felt too heavy to carry.

This was the first time they'd left the camp since the plains relocation. Supplies were running thin — and with most of the group still recovering, the burden fell on the few left standing.

Michael scanned the distant fields. "No movement. Yet."

Robert let out a tired grunt. "Let's keep it that way."

They moved with practiced quiet, boots soft against the broken road, eyes flicking from ditch to tree line. The world felt emptier than usual. Too still. Until—

"There," Adam said suddenly, slowing his pace.

At first it looked like a pile of gear tossed on the roadside. But as they approached, it became clearer — the slumped figure of a man, limbs askew, clothing tattered and dust-stained, head tucked against his chest like he'd folded into himself to disappear.

He didn't move.

"Hold position," Robert said, already reaching for his knife. "Could be bait."

But Adam ignored him, already stepping forward. "If it is, it's the worst setup I've ever seen."

The man's body gave a slight tremble.

Michael exhaled, unslinging his rifle just in case, but followed as Adam knelt beside the collapsed figure.

A minute passed. Then another.

Then the stranger stirred — a twitch of the fingers, a groan, and finally his eyes cracked open.

"Don't—don't touch the pistachios," he mumbled, voice ragged with dehydration.

Adam blinked. "What?"

The man's eyes widened suddenly, like he was trying to claw himself out of a fog. "Wait—where..."

Robert crouched, frowning. "You alone? What happened?"

The man sat up slowly, expression panicked and confused all at once. “There was... something. I was with people. Gone now. I think. Maybe I owe someone money?” His voice wavered, more to himself than them. “Hard to tell. Been walking too long.”

Michael raised a brow. “You hit your head, or are you just built like that?”

The man squinted up at them. “Depends. Is ‘built like that’ a compliment or a diagnosis?”

Adam stifled a tired laugh, glancing toward Robert.

Robert sighed. “What’s your name?”

The stranger groaned, rubbing his face with a shaking hand. “Kevin. I think. Yeah—Kevin.”

Kevin blinked a few more times, eyes unfocused, then squinted at Adam. “Do you have water? Or snacks? Wait—do you *have* pistachios?”

“No,” Robert said flatly. “And even if we did, you’re not getting them yet. Start talking.”

Kevin slumped dramatically, as if the weight of the world just dropped on him again. “Figures. Every time. Always the pistachios.” He accepted the water Adam handed him, chugging it like it was the last liquid on earth. Which, in a world like this, it nearly was.

Michael leaned in, unimpressed. “What happened to you?”

Kevin paused mid-drink, wiped his mouth, and let out a slow breath. “I was with a convoy. Guarding a trade envoy — standard security job. We were heading to a camp near the eastern power grid ruins. Got ambushed two nights ago.”

Robert’s jaw tightened. “TechRot?”

Kevin nodded grimly. “Three of them. Big ones. I fought ‘em off long enough for the rest to scatter, but I don’t think anyone else made it. Got knocked out cold. Woke up alone. Been wandering since.”

Michael tilted his head, skeptical. “And you’re still breathing?”

Kevin gave a crooked grin. “I’m good at not dying. Mostly. Military training... sort of. Also, part of some weird experiment years back. Something to do with reflex training and mental conditioning. Real hush-hush stuff. Long story short: I’m built to take a beating.”

“Explains why you look like a walking bruise,” Robert muttered.

Kevin didn’t take offense. He just grinned wider.

Adam sat back on his heels. “If you were assigned to a trade envoy, that means someone trusted you.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said, tone dropping slightly. “At least until I gambled our entire rice stash on a coin toss. Not proud of that one.”

Robert’s face twitched. “You gambled your group’s food?”

Kevin raised both hands. “They told me not to touch the supplies. I *touched* the supplies. Bad call. Haven’t been allowed near storage units since. But I *am* good at keeping people alive. Swear it.”

Michael and Robert exchanged a glance. Adam kept his focus on Kevin. Despite the scattered personality and strange humor, there was something real in his eyes — exhaustion, pain, loss. And maybe a bit of that desperate hope that everyone else carried too.

“You got anywhere to go?” Adam asked.

Kevin shook his head slowly. “Nope. Unless you’re offering.”

No one said anything right away. Wind hissed through the dry grass. Somewhere distant, a faint clicking sound reminded them that even now, TechRot might be listening.

Robert stood, motioning to the others. “We’ll talk. Don’t run off.”

“Run?” Kevin coughed a laugh. “Buddy, I can barely stand.”

As the three stepped a few paces away to confer, Kevin lay back in the dirt, staring at the sky.

“Please have pistachios,” he muttered to the clouds.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter XXXII: Utility in the Unlikely

The sun hung low on the horizon as the group continued their supply run, packs only half-filled and nerves tight from the recent encounter with Kevin. He walked behind the others, arms swaying loosely, boots scuffing the dirt with no particular sense of urgency.

Michael glanced back at him more than once. “You sure bringing him was a good idea?”

“We said if he’s useful,” Robert replied. “This is the test.”

Adam kept quiet, but his eyes remained sharp, always flicking to their surroundings, always calculating.

Kevin, for his part, whistled a strange tune and kicked at a loose rock, completely unbothered by the tension in the air. “So,” he piped up, “how long has it been since one of you had a proper night’s sleep that *didn’t* involve the threat of techno-mutated nightmares?”

Michael didn’t even turn around. “Shut up, Kevin.”

Kevin shrugged. “Fair.”

The trail they followed led into a more wooded region — sparse trees and broken signs, remains of what was once a gas station poking out from a blanket of ivy and rust. Robert signaled for the group to pause. “We’ll check that place. Might have fuel, tools, maybe a few edible scraps.”

They fanned out cautiously. The air had that metallic stillness that often came before a TechRot encounter. Adam felt it in his teeth — a low hum, like static under the skin. He froze.

“There’s something here,” he said quietly.

A soft chittering sound echoed from behind the building — not large, but distinct. Familiar.

Michael stepped back, hand on his weapon. “How bad do you think—”

A flash of metal and bone shot from the side of the ruins — fast, small, twitching with staccato jerks. A TechRot scout, about the size of a large dog, its limbs twisted with exposed wiring and fibrous sinew. It locked eyes with Adam—

—and launched.

Before anyone could react, Kevin had already moved. With a blur of speed unnatural for someone so laid-back, he shifted past Adam, unslinging a makeshift baton-like weapon from his back. It hummed with latent electricity, and in a single, fluid motion, he slammed it into the TechRot’s face mid-air.

The creature crumpled to the ground.

It twitched once.

Twice.

Then lay still.

Kevin crouched, rolled the body over with his foot, and gave it a long look. “Level 2,” he muttered. “Fast but flimsy. They always go for the throat. Creepy little guys.”

He turned back toward the others, weapon still humming faintly. “So... useful yet?”

Silence.

Michael blinked. “What the hell *was* that?”

Kevin grinned. “Instinct, baby. And some post-human conditioning. I mean, I got tested for it. I passed. Barely. Failed the math portion, though.”

Robert finally exhaled, stepping forward to inspect the kill. “Clean strike. Center of the cranium. You knew its weak point.”

“I studied,” Kevin said with a shrug. “You run into enough of these things, you start picking up patterns.”

Adam nodded slowly, the tension in his shoulders relaxing — just slightly. “That would’ve hit me if you hadn’t moved.”

“Consider it my tryout,” Kevin replied. “I’d prefer not to get kicked out of a group *again*. Especially one that might still have pistachios.”

The others were still visibly processing what they’d just seen — Kevin, with all his rambling and jokes and gambling mishaps, had just moved like a trained combatant. Like someone who belonged in a world this dangerous.

Michael crossed his arms. “Alright. I’ll admit it. He’s useful.”

Robert glanced to Adam, who gave a faint nod. “He’s in. But stay out of our supplies.”

Kevin held up both hands. “You wound me, gentlemen. Truly. My self-control is *impeccable*.”

“Yeah, sure,” Michael muttered. “Just don’t bet the medkits on coin flips.”

Kevin winked. “No promises.”

As the group continued their run, the tension had shifted. The unease remained, but now it was painted with something else — reluctant trust. Or at least the first drop of it.

Kevin, trailing behind once more, twirled his baton in one hand and whistled his strange, lopsided tune again.

The ruins of the gas station yielded more than just broken bricks and rusted fuel tanks. With Kevin now officially part of the search team, the pace of their scavenge picked up — not faster, exactly, but more confident.

They moved with purpose.

Adam pried open a locked storage shed behind the station with a crowbar, its contents dusty and disorganized but intact. “Medical kits,” he muttered, holding one up. “Expired, but most of this can still be used.”

Michael rifled through shelves of dusty boxed goods inside the small convenience store. “Canned peaches. Crackers. And...” He tilted his head and pulled a familiar green bag from the debris. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Kevin’s eyes lit up. “Is that—”

Michael held it overhead like a sacred artifact. “Pistachios. Sealed.”

Kevin took a reverent step forward. “I believe in miracles.”

“No,” Robert cut in, snatching the bag. “Rations first. If we find a second one, *maybe*.”

Kevin dramatically clutched his chest. “Betrayal. Deep and cruel.”

Meanwhile, Adam worked quietly, examining a shelf in the back where a few intact weapons lay coated in dust. A scratched-up rifle. A near-pristine combat knife. A parts bin.

“Mod components,” he said to himself. “Marianna and Michael could use these.”

Kevin walked over and peered at the parts. “You tinker?”

Adam nodded without looking up. “I retrofit our weapons when I can. Stability enhancers, cooling vents, silent barrels.”

“You any good?”

Adam finally looked up. “Good enough to keep people alive.”

Kevin gave a thoughtful nod. “Respect.”

By mid-afternoon, their packs were full. The food wouldn’t last long, but it was enough. The medical supplies — gauze, antiseptics, even a few clean syringes — would be vital for the wounded back at camp. And the tools Adam collected would allow him to improve Marianna’s sniper and Michael’s mace and riot shield.

As they made their way back toward the camp, the sun dipped low again, casting long orange shadows across the cracked road. Kevin had fallen into stride beside Robert, chewing a piece of stale gum he'd found somewhere.

"So, how long do I have to go without messing up before I'm allowed to be near the pistachios?"

Robert didn't even look at him. "We'll see."

Michael laughed, and even Adam cracked a faint smile. Just faint.

They approached the tree line near the plains, where the soft murmur of the river had become a distant but comforting presence. The camp's tents were visible now, dimly lit with lanterns and propped with care despite the trauma that lingered in every corner of their small world.

Kevin slowed his walk, eyes scanning the quiet movement of figures near the fire.

He took a deep breath. "So this is it, huh?"

"This is it," Adam replied.

Kevin nodded. "Think they'll like me?"

"No," Michael said flatly.

"Not at first," Robert added.

"But they'll trust you," Adam said. "Eventually."

Kevin smiled, tired but genuine. "I can live with that."

They stepped through the brush and into the camp — the newly found supplies in hand, hope bundled in cans, syringes, and a singular unopened bag of pistachios that might just last long enough to share.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter XXXIII – “Closed Gates”

The sun had barely dipped behind the distant ridge when Adam stepped through the trees into the heart of camp. His pack was slung over his shoulder, heavier with supplies than usual, but his stride had slowed — not from exhaustion, but from anticipation.

He could already hear them before he reached the fire.

Marie’s voice pierced the stillness. “You brought someone back?! Are you *serious*, Adam?”

He froze in his steps. The others were still behind him — Robert, Michael, and Kevin trailing a few paces back. Adam stepped forward alone, letting his presence answer the call.

Marianna stood up, her limp barely healed, eyes blazing. “Do you honestly think any of us are ready for this? We just *buried Azariah*.”

Sage sat cross-legged by the fire, arms crossed tightly over her chest. “You didn’t even ask. You just brought him.” Her voice was low, but that only made the words hit harder.

Adam held up a hand, trying to keep calm. “He’s not a threat. He was alone. Hurt. We couldn’t just leave him out there—”

“You *could* have,” Marie snapped, stepping closer. “You should have. Do you even care what we’ve just been through?”

“I *do* care,” Adam replied, his voice still level. “He helped us. He saved us from a TechRot. If you’d just listen—”

“We’ve listened enough!” Marianna shouted, voice breaking. “To lies. To ‘scans are clear.’ To false hope. To people telling us it’ll all be okay just before everything collapses.”

“She’s right,” Sage said, her tone harder now. “You might trust people too easily, Adam. But we *can’t afford to*. Not anymore.”

Adam’s jaw clenched. “You’re angry. I get it. But this isn’t just about fear. He’s *useful*. We’re still trying to survive—”

“We’re trying to hold together what’s *left* of us!” Marie yelled. “And every time someone new walks in, someone else doesn’t walk back out.”

The weight of that truth was too close, too real. Adam flinched — just barely — but didn’t argue.

Behind him, Kevin had stopped walking. His usual half-smile was gone, his posture uncertain. He was smart enough to know not to speak.

Michael and Robert exchanged tense glances but said nothing. This wasn’t their fight. Not yet.

Adam looked to Marie, then Marianna, then Sage. "You don't have to forgive me. But you *will* need to accept that I did what I thought was right."

"We're *done* with what you think is right," Marianna said coldly, turning her back.

One by one, the girls walked away into the growing dusk, their silhouettes folding into tents and shadows. The fire popped in the silence they left behind.

Kevin cleared his throat awkwardly. "So, uh... that went well."

Adam didn't answer. He stood for a long moment, just watching the fire. Then finally, quietly, he said, "Welcome to camp."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter XXXIV – “Cracked Compass”

Kevin sat cross-legged under the half-lean-to that Adam and Robert quickly patched up for him. It wasn't much — a tarp rigged between two warped posts — but it was better than the road.

“I can't believe you brought me into *this*,” Kevin muttered, trying to brush dust off a dented ration tin.

Michael tossed him a half-full water flask. “Better than bleeding out in a ditch, right?”

“Debatable,” Kevin replied, but he took the water anyway.

Adam was pacing. His voice was calm but serious. “They're not going to accept you overnight. I don't blame them — not after what we lost. You want to stay? You have to prove yourself. Not to me. To them.”

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “You mean the ones who looked like they wanted to tear your head off? Sure. Easy.”

“I'm not joking,” Adam said. “You gamble with their trust, and you're gone.”

Robert nodded in agreement. “You helped with that TechRot out there. That got you this far. But this isn't a test you pass once. You're in it every day.”

Kevin leaned back, surprisingly quiet for once. “...Got it.”

Michael kicked at the dirt. “We'll help you settle in. Give you a fair shot. Just don't make us regret it.”

On the other side of camp, near the fire, three voices crackled louder than the flames.

“He just *brought* him here.” Sage's voice trembled with frustration. “Didn't ask. Didn't warn. Just dragged in another stray like this is all a game.”

Marianna was sitting on an overturned crate, arms wrapped tight around her legs. “He barely made it out with his own life. We all did. And the first thing he thinks to do is risk someone else walking into our grief?”

Marie's hands were shaking. “He's so... *dumb* sometimes. So focused on saving everyone that he forgets we're already broken.”

“I don't care how useful this new guy is,” Marianna said, eyes fixed on the trees. “It's not about that. It's about what we lost. About Azariah. About *trust*. And Adam burned it.”

Sage's shoulders dropped, voice softening. “It feels like he doesn't even care that we're still bleeding.”

“Or maybe he does,” Marie whispered, “but he’s trying so hard not to feel it... that he’s just pretending none of it matters.”

The fire snapped as another branch caught flame, but the warmth didn’t reach their bitterness.

They sat in silence for a while, surrounded by the noise of a camp trying to rebuild, their hearts too sore to join it yet.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter XXXV – *Flickers of Grace*

The fire crackled between them, throwing sparks into the slowly darkening sky. Sage sat with her knees pulled to her chest, arms folded. Marianna hadn't moved from her crate, her eyes vacant. Marie tugged at a loose thread on her sleeve, her jaw clenched.

Alex stepped closer, hesitating at the edge of the glow.

"Can I say something?" he asked softly.

Sage didn't look up. Marianna gave the smallest nod. Marie shifted uncomfortably but didn't object.

Alex took a breath. "I know you're mad at Adam. I get it. But... he didn't bring Kevin here to hurt anyone. He brought him because... he's just trying to protect us."

"By making decisions without us?" Marianna said bitterly.

"No, not like that," Alex said, stepping a little closer. "He just... he always thinks he has to carry everything. Every mistake. Every death. It's not fair, but he believes it's his responsibility. Maybe he brought Kevin here because he thought we needed help — even if we weren't ready to say it."

Marie's voice cracked. "He didn't even talk to us."

"I don't think he knows how to anymore," Alex said gently. "Not after Azariah. Not with how much everyone's hurting. I think he's scared that if he slows down, he'll feel everything and fall apart."

They were silent again. Even the fire quieted for a moment, soft and low.

"He's just doing what he always does," Alex murmured. "Looking out for us. Even if it's clumsy. Even if it's not what we wanted. He's still trying."

Marie finally looked over at him. Her eyes were rimmed red, but her voice had lost its bite. "You really believe that?"

"I do," Alex said, unwavering. "And I think maybe we're being too hard on him. I know we're hurting. But he is too. He just doesn't show it the same way."

Sage exhaled slowly. "It still doesn't make it okay."

"No," Alex said. "But maybe it makes it... understandable."

Marianna looked down at the dirt between her shoes, tracing a scar in the earth with her toe. "It still feels like betrayal. But..."

She didn't finish. None of them needed her to.

For now, the anger dimmed — not gone, but dulled by the flicker of understanding that maybe they weren't the only ones wounded.

Elsewhere in camp, Kevin was hauling scrap metal near the tool shed, grunting with effort and muttering complaints under his breath.

"Never said I was a pack mule," he groaned, tossing the rusted sheet aside. "You blow up one TechRot, suddenly you're the errand boy."

Despite the grumbling, he worked fast. In the last two hours, he'd fixed a jammed water pulley, patched a hole in one of the storage tents, and reorganized the weapons cache with Robert.

Adam approached from the side, watching him wipe sweat from his brow.

"You don't have to do it all at once," Adam said.

"Thought you said I had to prove I'm useful," Kevin replied, standing straight. "Didn't realize it'd involve this much heavy lifting."

Adam offered a tired smile. "They're watching. Just not ready to admit it yet."

"Tell them I come with pistachios next time," Kevin said, fishing one from his jacket and tossing it into his mouth. "Might make things smoother."

Michael walked past, nodding. "You're doing alright. Keep it up."

Kevin gave a lazy salute. "Sir, yes sir. Commander Pistachio, at your service."

Nearby, Robert was showing him how to reinforce a weak section of the perimeter fence. Kevin nodded, his usual snark softened by genuine attention.

By the time dusk settled fully, Kevin had visited nearly every tent and offered to help someone — carrying, fixing, repairing, or just talking. Even if few offered words in return, some eyes were beginning to watch without judgment.

As the sun dipped behind the horizon, Kevin sat down near the main tent, rubbing his sore arms and cracking open another pistachio shell.

He looked up at the sky, exhaled, and muttered, "One day at a time."

Not far away, Adam observed him from a distance, unsure of whether to be relieved or anxious. For now, Kevin was trying — and maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter XXXVI – *Tensions in the Quiet*

Jadrien had been quiet for hours, sitting on the edge of camp with his arms folded. His eyes barely moved as he scanned the horizon, as if waiting for something to jump out at him. He had hardly spoken since they'd returned, save for the occasional mutter when he thought no one was listening. Even then, it was only to himself, grumbling low under his breath.

Marie was tired, too tired to argue, but something about Jadrien's silence was starting to bother her. He'd always been talkative, sometimes annoyingly so. But now, he was distant — too distant. He knew better than to bottle everything inside.

She walked over to him, not even trying to mask her frustration. "You've been sitting there for a while," she said, her voice sharp. "What's eating at you?"

Jadrien didn't answer immediately, his gaze lingering on the campfire for a long moment. The flames flickered, casting shadows on his face, and for the first time in what felt like days, he spoke.

"Why the hell is he still here?" Jadrien's voice was low, but there was no mistaking the disgust in his words.

Marie blinked, unsure if she had heard him right. "Who?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Kevin," Jadrien spat the name out like it left a bad taste on his tongue. "Why the hell is he still here?"

Marie took a slow breath, trying to gather her patience. "Adam's trying to help him out," she explained, though the words felt weak even to her. "He's been through something — don't you think we should at least give him a chance?"

"Give him a chance?" Jadrien let out a bitter laugh. "We don't have room for someone like him, Marie. What the hell is Adam thinking, bringing him here after everything that's happened?" He shook his head, his eyes now narrowing with frustration. "It's like he thinks it'll make everything better, like throwing a body into the fire will somehow change what we lost."

Marie watched him carefully, her arms crossed. The anger in Jadrien's tone wasn't a surprise, but the depth of it startled her. He rarely let anything get under his skin this much, especially not something like this.

"I get it," Marie said quietly. "You're still angry. We all are. But this is about survival, Jadrien. He might be annoying, he might not be what we want right now, but we can't afford to turn away help."

Jadrien snapped his head toward her, his eyes blazing. “This isn’t help. This is a distraction. A damn fool who doesn’t belong here.” He stood up abruptly, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “We didn’t need another person, especially not one who’s been through who knows what — acting like it’s nothing.” He glanced toward the makeshift camp where Kevin was sitting by the fire, talking with Robert in low tones. “You think he’s going to help us, Marie? Look at him. He’s a liability.”

Marie bit the inside of her cheek, trying to keep the frustration from spilling out. She could see where Jadrien was coming from, but she didn’t want to feed into the tension. “Adam doesn’t trust easily,” she said softly. “He trusts Kevin. He believes he has something to offer. So we give him a chance.”

Jadrien’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t look away from Kevin. “And what if he’s just another one of those people who gets us killed? I don’t want to play games with that again. Not after... everything.” His voice faltered slightly as he glanced down at the dirt, his anger briefly giving way to something softer — something more vulnerable. But he quickly brushed it aside, pushing it down.

Marie sighed, her own emotions rising to the surface. “We all have things we’re dealing with. Don’t make it harder for the rest of us, Jadrien. You’re not the only one who’s hurting.”

Jadrien didn’t reply immediately. He couldn’t meet her eyes. After a long pause, he muttered, “I’m not making it harder. I’m just saying what we all know.” He turned his back to her, his posture tense. “We don’t need him.”

Marie stood there for a moment, watching Jadrien’s stiff back, before finally stepping closer. “I don’t agree. But I understand why you feel that way. Just... don’t take it out on everyone else, okay?”

Without waiting for his response, she walked away. Jadrien remained still, staring at the flickering fire as his thoughts twisted, tangled, and churned. He didn’t know if he could handle someone else in the group right now, especially someone like Kevin. The idea of another person who might fail them — who might bring more death, more pain — gnawed at him.

The silence of the night wrapped around him once more. The crackling fire was the only sound, and even that felt too loud.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter XXXVII — The Space He Left Behind

It started as one of Adam's quiet midday departures. He'd packed light: a knife, a flask, and a few strips of dried meat. Nothing unusual. Adam had taken to wandering off lately—sometimes to scavenge, sometimes just to think. Everyone noticed, but no one asked. Not because they didn't care, but because caring had become exhausting.

Marie had furrowed her brow when she saw him leave, but returned to sorting herbs with Sage. Marianna was asleep. Robert was fixing up a broken storage panel. Alex, caught in the middle of tuning a salvaged circuit, barely glanced up.

The first night passed in uneasy silence. Morning came, then noon, and still no Adam.

"Anyone seen him?" Marie asked flatly, her voice tight with something too fragile to name.

"Maybe he's just... exploring?" Sage offered weakly, not believing it herself.

Robert shook his head. "No tools are missing. That's not like him."

The concern was no longer avoidable. Whispered questions darted between camp chores. Even Alex set down his pliers and sat still for a long time, staring at the empty corner of the shelter where Adam's tools usually hung.

Jadrien had been quiet all morning. His mouth finally opened with a sigh. "Fine. I'll go look. Kev, you coming?"

Kevin raised a brow but nodded. "Yeah. Let's go find the brainiac."

The woods were quiet, too quiet. The usual hum of insects and distant TechRot scuttles was absent, replaced by an eerie stillness that turned every step into a drumbeat.

They found Adam an hour later.

Collapsed in a ditch, body crumpled against a tree root, torn open like he'd been attacked by something feral. His shirt was shredded, blood darkened the dirt around him, and his breathing was a harsh rattle through cracked lips.

Kevin froze, jaw slack. "Shit."

Jadrien stood still, staring at Adam. His face twisted—anger, confusion, bitterness? "He's not gonna make it."

Kevin crouched beside him. "We gotta get him back. We have meds—"

“Why?” Jadrien’s voice was sharper than expected. “So he can be dead weight? You know how much he’s already been carrying? He’s cracked. Burnt out. Useless like this.”

Kevin looked up. “You serious right now?”

Jadrien took a step back. “We’ve all lost people. Everyone’s bleeding out from something. What’s one more?”

“You don’t mean that,” Kevin said, standing.

Jadrien met his gaze. “I do. We can’t carry everyone. He made this choice.”

There was a long silence.

Then they turned away.

When they returned, it was dusk. Alex ran up first. “Did you find him?”

Kevin hesitated. Jadrien stepped in, voice cold. “No. No trace. He probably ran off. Couldn’t handle things anymore.”

The camp fell into stunned silence.

Robert narrowed his eyes. “That doesn’t sound like Adam.”

“No,” Marianna whispered. “He wouldn’t leave us.”

Marie didn’t say anything, but the look on her face said everything.

Kevin avoided everyone’s eyes.

And in the corner of the woods, not far from where they’d walked away, Adam lay bleeding under the trees—unconscious, and utterly alone.

It's Been A Blast

Hello Dear Friends Glad You've Made It
This Far In The Journey

This Book Has Ended

But New Journeys Shall Start

The Next Chapters Will Be Of Part Two

And Why Would I Not Just Make The
Current One Better And Expand It???

Well Because This Will Never Be
Published.

So It Will Just Be For This Group And This
Group Alone.

Enjoy Part Two
(COMING SOON)

Book Two Title

Fracture and Flame

Book Two of the Techrot
Saga

2/ Chapter One

Book II Chapter I: "A Leaf Turned Over"

The sun rose lazily over the horizon, casting golden hues over the wide clearing the group now called home. A gentle breeze rustled the tall grass, and the distant sound of the river running nearby was a familiar hum in the background. Birds chirped. The occasional groan of reinforced scrap metal creaked in the wind. For the first time in a long time, the world felt still.

It had been a year since they left their last camp behind.

The horrors of that time were buried deep, tucked beneath laughter and long days of rebuilding. No one really talked about what had happened anymore. Not the invasion. Not Adam. Not Allison. Not even Azariah.

Especially not Azariah.

Kevin stretched with a loud yawn, stepping out of the supply hut while chewing lazily on a handful of pistachios he definitely wasn't supposed to have. His vest was half-buttoned, and his boots were untied. He scratched the back of his head as he looked around the camp — new walls, better defenses, a water system Levi had recently overhauled.

Levi.

The new tinkerer had been with them for about eight months now, quiet and curious, not nearly as excitable as Adam but somehow just as dependable. With short, messy hair usually smudged with oil, and a mind that rarely stopped thinking, Levi had earned the group's trust without trying too hard. He didn't smile often, but when he did, it was warm. Earnest.

He was bent over a disassembled drone now, muttering something about power regulators and shielding plates. Michael stood beside them, helping out where he could and cracking jokes that Levi either ignored or didn't understand.

"Camp grid's solid," Levi mumbled, adjusting a wire. "This thing should work like a roaming scout. Just... give me a few more days."

"You said that last week," Michael grinned.

Levi rolled his eyes.

Not far away, Marianna and Marie sat side by side, weaving baskets from dried reeds by the riverbank. It was something Marianna had picked up during their travels, a way to keep her hands busy. The deep scars on her arm from the hounds had faded but still ached in the cold. She worked in silence, occasionally glancing up to meet Marie's eye.

"We've come a long way, huh?" Marie said quietly.

Marianna nodded. "Yeah... We really did."

The tone was soft. Reflective. The two girls had found a rhythm again, no longer driven by survival but by the gentle cadence of routine. The grief hadn't vanished — it never could — but it had dulled, reshaped itself into something manageable.

Robert and Jadrien were patching the perimeter fence, arguing over which direction the support beams were supposed to face.

"Bro, I'm telling you, the brace goes *inward*. Think of pressure points!" Jadrien insisted, wielding a wrench like a sword.

Robert grunted. "You've never used a wrench in your life. Don't start now."

"Correction: I've *seen* it used. Same thing."

Despite himself, Robert chuckled. Even Jadrien, the clown of the group, had grown more grounded this past year. His eyes still held a shadow, but he buried it beneath humor and harmless nonsense.

Alex, now a little taller, a little more confident, helped Sage lay out preserved rations. He no longer clung to others. He *belonged* now. The group was his home, the people his family. He laughed when Jadrien tossed a bent fork at him. He smiled as Sage ruffled his hair.

Kevin watched them all for a moment. A strange calm had settled here. Peace. It was real. He rubbed his neck and looked down at the pistachio shell in his hand, suddenly feeling like it weighed more than it should.

He hadn't thought of that night in months. Not really. Not deeply.

But sometimes — when things got too quiet — he still saw the look on Adam's face as they turned away.

He shoved the shell into his pocket.

No one ever brought it up. No one ever questioned Jadrien's story again. But Kevin knew. And Jadrien knew that he knew.

Still, Kevin smiled and waved as Levi passed by, holding another coil of wire.

"You ever sleep?" Kevin asked.

"Once. In '23," Levi replied flatly.

Kevin laughed.

Another day began.

The air was cleaner here. The sun felt less cruel. The infestation still roamed the world beyond, but within these walls, they had carved something out for themselves. A slice of normal.

They were still broken in ways. But stitched back together.

Not perfect. Never perfect.

But good.

Very good.

2/ Chapter Two

Book II – Chapter II: Ghost in the Gears

The early morning light filtered through the trees like soft gold, catching on the dew still clinging to the tall grass outside camp. The air was cool — not cold, but calm. The kind of quiet that felt like the world itself had taken a deep breath and paused.

Alex adjusted the straps on his pack, glancing over at Levi who was crouched near the supply crates, double-checking their tools and emergency flares. Levi was always like that — methodical, cautious, but calm. There was no rush in his movements, just practiced patience.

“You ready?” Alex asked.

Levi looked up and offered a short nod. “Yeah. Food, medicine, wire, and maybe a few parts for the solar grid if we’re lucky.”

They exchanged a few more words with Marie and Robert before slipping through the worn gate that marked the edge of their encampment. The metal hinges creaked as they closed it behind them. Then they were alone, their footsteps muffled by the dirt road that stretched ahead.

For a while, they didn’t speak.

Alex didn’t mind. It had taken time to find comfort in silence, but now it felt like an old blanket — something you could wrap around yourself without needing to explain why.

“Hey,” Levi said after a few minutes. “Is this your first run without someone else from the original crew?”

Alex thought about that. “Yeah,” he answered quietly. “First since... before everything changed.”

Levi didn’t ask what “everything” meant. He didn’t have to.

They passed the skeleton of an old billboard, its surface peeled and sun-bleached, barely holding together under the weight of time. Vines snaked up its metal supports. On the cracked pavement below, tufts of grass fought through every fracture in the concrete, thriving in the broken places.

“You ever think it’s weird?” Levi said, eyes scanning the roadside. “That it’s been a year and there are still echoes of them everywhere?”

Alex glanced sideways. “Who?”

“The people before. You find little things — toys, scribbled notes, broken glasses. Like they’re still here, just invisible.”

Alex didn’t answer. His hands tightened around his pack straps.

After another mile, they reached the outskirts of the old tech depot. The building stood half-collapsed, metal siding bent like torn paper, windows broken, and vines overtaking what little structure remained.

Inside, shadows loomed.

Alex reached for the flashlight clipped to his belt and clicked it on. "Let's be careful."

"Always," Levi said with a faint grin.

They stepped over the threshold into the cool dark. The floor was littered with debris: metal shavings, fallen support beams, rusted crates. Old shelving units leaned precariously along the walls. Nature had started to reclaim it — moss coating the floor tiles, small plants sprouting from cracks.

"Split up?" Levi asked.

Alex shook his head. "Let's stick together."

They moved slow. Measured. Alex kept his eyes on every corner, every rustling sound. Despite the silence, something gnawed at the back of his mind — that subtle itch you get when you're being watched.

Then he saw it.

Perched on a broken filing cabinet near the far wall was a crow. But not a real one. No flapping of wings, no twitching of feathers. This was mechanical — sleek, matte black metal with intricate, moving parts. Its head moved, smooth and soundless, tracking them.

"Levi," Alex said, voice low. "Don't move."

Levi followed his gaze and froze.

"What is that?"

"It's not TechRot," Alex said slowly. "It's... something else."

The crow tilted its head. One eye glinted faintly — a pale green light pulsing within its socket. It didn't make a sound. It didn't threaten. It just... watched.

Alex took a slow step forward. "Shoo."

The crow didn't move.

Another step. "Shoo, damn it!"

Still nothing.

Frustration sparked. Alex snatched a wrench from the floor and hurled it.

The crow leapt — a fluid, impossible movement — dodging with ease and fluttering up to a nearby shelf. The wrench clanged against the wall and fell uselessly to the floor.

And then the voice came.

A warped, slightly distorted voice through the crow's chest speaker — like it had aged, been run through static — but still recognizable beneath the noise.

"That is no way to treat the creation of your old friend now, is it, kiddo?"

Alex froze.

The room spun. His breath caught. His heart pounded like it had been yanked from sleep.

The voice — *that* voice — echoed in his chest more than his ears.

"...Adam?" he whispered.

Levi stared at the crow, completely lost. "Alex? What's going on?"

The crow shifted its wings and clicked slightly, that glowing eye still locked onto Alex.

"I said—" Alex took a step forward, then faltered. "Say it again."

The crow didn't repeat itself. It only tilted its head again — an uncanny motion that looked *too* deliberate. Too familiar.

Levi took a cautious step toward Alex. "You okay?"

Alex didn't answer. His lips parted like he might speak, but the words didn't come. His mind was racing backward — to the sound of Adam laughing while soldering a broken transmitter, to the feel of warm metal tools passed hand to hand, to that odd nickname "*kiddo*" Adam had always used, even when no one else did.

He was shaking now.

It didn't make sense. Adam was gone.

But the voice...

The crow.

The speaker clicked once more. This time, it made no sound.

Levi finally said, "Alex, *what is that thing?*"

Alex barely heard him. He took another trembling step forward.

“...He’s alive,” he said, barely a whisper. “Somewhere...”

And then — silence. No more words. The crow unfolded its wings again, mechanical plates sliding open like puzzle pieces. It rose into the air and glided out a broken window, vanishing into the sky.

Alex ran forward, but by the time he reached the ledge, it was already gone.

Levi caught up behind him, panting slightly. “What the hell was that?”

Alex didn’t answer.

The building was quiet again. But the silence didn’t feel peaceful anymore.

Something had changed.

2/ Chapter Three

Book II – Chapter III: Watcher on the Wire

They gathered supplies in silence.

Levi kept the checklist in one hand, crossing off items with slow strokes of his pencil: nonperishables, bandages, spare batteries, low-gauge wire. But every so often, he'd glance over at Alex, brows pinched.

Alex moved through the wreckage like a ghost, his motions careful but distant. He kept stealing glances at the broken window where the crow had vanished. His hands trembled slightly when he packed up the last of the ration boxes.

He hadn't said a word since the crow spoke.

Levi finally broke the silence. "You're sure you're okay?"

Alex didn't answer at first. Then, barely audible: "Yeah."

But he wasn't. His eyes stayed trained on every shadow. On the rafters. The corners. The empty ceiling. And eventually, the crow returned.

It perched on the top edge of a leaning steel beam, talons clicking softly as they shifted for balance. It didn't move closer. It didn't speak. It simply watched.

Alex avoided its gaze, but Levi couldn't take his eyes off it. "It's been following us."

"I know."

"You still think it's Adam?"

Alex tightened the strap on his pack and started walking. "I don't know what I think."

The walk back to camp was long and quiet. Overgrown streets stretched ahead like empty veins. The wind rustled through broken windows and tree roots cracked the pavement. And always — *always* — the crow stayed behind them. Never more than thirty feet. Never less than ten.

It didn't fly. It walked, clicking metal claws softly against the concrete, pausing only when they did.

Even Levi, usually even-tempered and methodical, was unnerved.

"You don't think it's dangerous?" he asked at one point.

"If it wanted to hurt us," Alex murmured, "it had plenty of chances."

That shut Levi up.

By the time they returned to the gate, the sun was dipping low in the sky, casting the camp in warm golds and long shadows. Kids were boiling water near the fire pit. Robert was organizing gear near the weapon rack. Marie stood on the edge of the garden, arms crossed, watching them approach.

Then her eyes shifted — past them — to the crow.

“What the hell is *that*?”

They stopped just inside the perimeter. Alex turned. The crow clicked its way past the gate and hopped lightly up to a wooden platform near the tents. It paused there, surveying the camp, then with a flutter of metal wings, it launched itself upward — and landed neatly on the curved top of Alex’s tent.

As if it had always belonged there.

A few people muttered under their breath. Marie looked from Alex to the crow, then back again. “Alex—?”

“I need to talk to you,” Alex said quickly. “You and Jadrien and Marianna.”

She hesitated. “Is this about—?”

“Just... come on.”

They followed him to the far side of camp where the noise faded and the trees offered a little shade. Marianna was already nearby cleaning a knife; she glanced up as they approached and immediately frowned when she saw the expression on Alex’s face.

“What happened?”

Alex glanced around, checking for listening ears, then launched into the story — from the supply run to the crow’s voice, the dodge, the nickname, the moment it landed on his tent like it knew who he was.

“...and I swear, it was his voice. Not just *similar*. I *knew* it.”

Marianna’s lips parted, eyes wide. Marie crossed her arms again but didn’t speak.

Jadrien, leaning against a low tree, was quiet.

Too quiet.

His arms had stiffened at his sides. His jaw tensed ever so slightly.

Alex noticed.

“What?”

“Huh?” Jadrien blinked and forced a grin. “You think some busted drone with a soundboard is Adam?”

“I didn’t say that,” Alex replied. “But you seem... nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.” Jadrien looked away. “I just think we’ve seen enough fake-outs and ghosts to last a lifetime.”

“But *you* were there,” Alex said slowly, eyes narrowing. “That night. When he left.”

Marianna looked between them now, expression darkening. “Jadrien—”

“We all mourn differently, alright?” he snapped, a little too fast. “Sometimes things just *die*. You don’t go chasing every rusty bird because it reminds you of someone who isn’t here anymore.”

Silence.

Levi stepped up, hesitant. “Even if it *isn’t* Adam... shouldn’t we at least try to find out where it came from? Who made it?”

Jadrien shook his head, already backing off. “Nope. That thing’s a dead end. You can poke at it all you want, but I’m not going to chase shadows. Not anymore.”

He turned and walked off without another word.

Alex stood still, jaw clenched, watching him disappear between tents.

“...He *knows* something,” he whispered.

Marie ran a hand through her hair. “Maybe. But Jadrien doesn’t tell unless he wants to.”

“What do we do?” Marianna asked.

Alex turned, looking back toward his tent. The crow was still there — unmoving, eyes glowing faintly, waiting.

“I think,” he said quietly, “we figure out what it *really* wants.”

2/ Chapter Four

Book II – Chapter IV: Footsteps in the Dust

The morning was warm, humid with the soft promise of rain.

Camp buzzed in quiet, routine motion — Levi adjusting solar panels on the perimeter, Robert sharpening blades by the fire pit, and Sage moving through the herb garden with her usual quiet concentration. The air carried a fragile sense of normalcy. But it wasn't quite right.

Because the crow was moving.

Not flying — never flying — but *walking*. Deliberate. Mechanical. Its sleek black talons clicked sharply against the cracked concrete like a metronome, echoing through the otherwise gentle morning. It didn't skitter or flutter. It *strolled*. Like it had all the time in the world.

And it wasn't watching *everyone* now.

Just Marie.

She noticed it when the clicks began circling the far edge of the cookfire. At first, she thought it was scavenging — some leftover wiring, a piece of rusted tin. But then the crow changed direction.

Click.

Click.

Click.

It approached slowly, as if savoring the moment.

Marie froze. She didn't flinch — she never did — but her hand shifted slightly closer to the hilt of her blade.

The crow stopped three feet away. Its head tilted to one side.

Then, from its chest, that voice crackled to life — *grainy*, like an old radio:

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Marie's entire body locked.

Her breath hitched once, so faintly it could've been mistaken for the wind. But her eyes—her eyes—darkened like storm clouds rolling in.

"...Say that again," she said coldly.

The crow didn't move. Its lenses whirled, focusing slightly. Then it repeated:

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

She stared at it, unmoving. The others hadn't noticed yet — too busy, too far, and the voice had spoken softly, low and even. But Marie felt the heat flush under her skin. That voice. That *voice*.

Not just similar. *Exact*.

The modulation, the pauses. The warmth buried beneath static. It wasn't a guess anymore.

It was *Adam's*.

She crouched slowly to the crow's eye level.

"What the hell are you?" she whispered.

The crow tilted its head the other way, whirring faintly, but said nothing more. Its inner mechanisms ticked faintly, audible now that she was this close — not crude or jagged like TechRot, but precise. *Crafted*. Smooth.

Handmade.

She gritted her teeth. "You're a puppet."

The crow gave no reply.

"I don't know who sent you, or why you're wearing *his voice*, but if this is someone's sick joke—"

"He said you'd say that," the crow replied suddenly.

Marie recoiled like she'd been struck. "What?"

"He said you'd say it was a trick."

For a moment, time stopped. Only the distant clatter of pots and the hum of wind.

Her voice cracked now, barely above a breath. "He... who?"

But the crow's eyes blinked — two mechanical shutters closing and opening with a tiny hiss — and it turned.

Without another word, it resumed its walk, talons clacking against stone, weaving past the water barrels and into the low brush beyond the eastern tents. Not in a hurry. Not retreating.

Just moving.

Marie sat back on her heels.

She hadn't realized her hands were shaking until she looked down and saw her fingers twitch. She didn't tell anyone. Not yet.

Not when Levi asked if she was okay. Not when Sage offered her a bowl of dried berries with a concerned glance. Not even when Marianna passed by and said, quietly, "It's watching all of us now."

Marie just nodded and returned to her spot beside the fence line, carving the edge of her blade sharper and sharper, as if she could scrape the unease out of her bones with steel.

But that night, after the fires dimmed and camp began to fall quiet, she walked slowly to Alex's tent.

The crow was still perched on top, as if guarding him.

Watching her approach, but saying nothing.

Marie stood beneath it, staring up into its blinking eyes.

"...If you're really in there," she said, voice low, "you better have a damn good reason for all of this."

Then she turned and walked away.

And behind her, the crow's head followed—clicking softly to track her retreat.

2/ Chapter Five

Book II – Chapter V: Echoes of Guilt

The stars above the camp flickered behind thin clouds, cold and distant. A soft wind rattled through the scaffolding near the east wall, barely audible over the creaking tents and the occasional night chirp of distant insects. Most of the camp had quieted—Levi snoring softly near his scrap pile, Sage sleeping in her usual curled posture near the garden, Marianna and Marie turned away from the fire, backs to the dark.

But one tent was not silent.

Jadrien's tent rustled faintly. From within, muffled mutters and the gentle creak of shifting fabric could be heard—restless movement, maybe. He hadn't been sleeping well. Not for weeks.

And tonight... he would not sleep at all.

Because someone—or something—was waiting outside.

The crow.

It stood like a statue, hunched on the short wooden post by Jadrien's tent entrance. Not perched high. Not watching from afar. *Right there*. Directly in front.

Its lenses glowed dim red in the dark, twin eyes unblinking. The low hum of internal servos gave it an eerie, faint heartbeat. It didn't twitch. Didn't preen its wings. It just *watched*.

And when the flap of Jadrien's tent finally peeled open with a groggy grumble, he stepped out in bare feet, rubbing one eye, muttering, "Damn wind... forgot to tie—"

He froze.

The crow stood less than two feet away.

"...What the hell?" he mumbled, stumbling back. "You scared the crap out of me."

The crow's eyes refocused.

Whir.

Click.

Its talons shifted. One clawed foot forward.

Jadrien tensed. His posture stiffened into something more alert now. Defensive.

"What do you want?" he asked, voice sharp now. "You watching me or something?"

Then—

"You left me for dead."

The voice wasn't grainy this time. It wasn't warbled by static or softened by mechanical inflection.

It was *crystal clear*.

Adam's voice. Unfiltered. Crisp. Like he was standing right there. Like he'd never left.

Jadrien's expression twisted, panic flickering behind practiced nonchalance.

"Wh—no. No, shut up. You're not him."

The crow tilted its head.

"You left me for dead, Jadrien."

He staggered back a step, breathing heavier now. "That's not real. You're just some *thing*. Just... someone programmed this, some twisted prank—!"

The crow stepped forward again.

"You *watched* me bleed."

Jadrien's hands clenched into fists.

"Stop it. *Shut up!*"

But the crow didn't shout. Didn't chase. It only turned away.

Without another word, it began walking—slowly, with the same deliberate cadence—its talons clicking with eerie rhythm on the pavement.

Click.

Click.

Click.

And then it was gone.

Jadrien stood frozen at the flap of his tent, breath shallow, his throat tight and his hands trembling.

He didn't try to call it back. Didn't ask where it was going.

He just stared into the night for a long, long time.

2/ Chapter Six

Book II – Chapter VI: *Why Didn't You?*

The crow was gone.

Its absence was more than just a missing shape on the rooftops or the clicking of talons. It was a silence that clung to the camp like a fog, thick and heavy. Everyone felt it. Even those who hadn't paid the thing much mind before.

But for Sage, it was something else entirely.

She had heard it. In the night. The words it said to Jadrien.

"You left me for dead."

And she hadn't slept since.

That morning, she found Marie near the garden, tending to a few sprouts fighting to survive in the cooler season.

Marie glanced up. "You look pale," she muttered.

"I heard it," Sage said.

Marie raised a brow. "The crow?"

Sage nodded. "It said something to Jadrien last night."

Marie stilled. "What did it say?"

Sage hesitated. "It said... '*You left me for dead.*'"

Marie stared at her, as if trying to decide whether she'd heard correctly. Then she stood abruptly, brushing soil from her hands.

A minute later, they were storming across camp.

Jadrien was near the tool rack, pretending to fix a busted shovel handle. He looked up and smirked—until he saw Marie's expression.

"What?" he asked. "You lose another crow?"

"Cut the act," Marie snapped. "What did it say to you?"

He froze.

Sage stepped forward. "I heard it, Jadrien. I *heard* what it said."

Jadrien's jaw tightened. "It was just a glitch. A recording. Someone messing with us."

"That wasn't a glitch," Marie hissed. "That was Adam's voice."

Jadrien's shoulders tensed. "Even if it was Adam... what difference does it make?"

"Everything," Sage muttered.

From the other side of the camp, Kevin approached slowly. He'd been listening. He always listened. For once, his goofiness was nowhere in sight. His hands were clenched at his sides.

"Tell them the truth, Jadrien," he said quietly.

Jadrien turned. "Kevin, don't—"

Kevin shook his head. "No. I kept my mouth shut for too long. I thought I could live with it. But I can't."

Marie's eyes narrowed. "Live with what?"

Kevin exhaled. "We found him. Adam. A year ago. He wandered off. Said he needed time. When he didn't come back, we went looking. Me and Jadrien."

Silence fell.

"We found him," Kevin said, voice cracking. "He was mauled. Barely breathing. He looked at us... and—Jadrien said we should leave him. Said he'd take up space. That he'd slow us down."

Sage covered her mouth.

Marie's face was pale.

Kevin looked down. "I didn't want to leave him. But Jadrien... he said if I didn't shut up, he'd get me kicked out. Said no one would believe me."

There was a sound behind them. Footsteps. Fast.

Alex.

His face was red. His eyes wide.

"You WHAT?"

Everyone turned.

Alex stood there, trembling, eyes filled with fire and tears.

“You *left him?*” he shouted. “You just—left him out there?!”

“Alex,” Jadrien started, “I thought he was dying—”

“YOU DON’T GET TO DECIDE THAT!” Alex screamed.

The entire camp went still.

Tears streamed down his face now, his fists clenched.

“You *could’ve brought him back!* You could’ve *tried!* Why didn’t you try?! Why didn’t you—*WHY?!*”

He broke into sobs, falling to his knees.

Kevin looked away, guilt etched deep into every line of his face. Jadrien didn’t speak. He couldn’t. His voice was gone.

Alex looked up again, eyes bloodshot.

“I hate you,” he whispered. “I *hate* you both.”

And with that, he turned and ran.

He found Marie minutes later, sitting alone behind the water barrels. She didn’t say anything when he collapsed beside her, still shaking. She didn’t interrupt when he poured out everything he’d held back—his confusion, his anger, his sadness so deep it had become a permanent ache.

Marie just listened.

When he was done, she placed a hand gently on his back.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she said softly.

“I just miss him,” he mumbled.

“I do too,” she said.

The camp felt colder that night. Not from the wind, but from the weight of truth finally unearthed—and the fractures it left behind.

2/ Chapter Seven

Book II – Chapter VII: *The Letter*

The camp had quieted again, but it wasn't peaceful. It was the silence of a storm passed, the kind that leaves everything scattered and broken in its wake. No one spoke much that evening. Meals were skipped. Fires burned low. The few voices that did surface were hushed, like they feared waking something fragile.

Alex sat under the stars for a long time.

He had cried all he could. There was nothing left now but an emptiness — and a simmering ache that pulsed with every heartbeat. He hadn't meant to scream like that. But maybe he had. Maybe it had all been waiting to pour out for months, tucked deep behind everything he'd tried to keep moving forward for.

He felt exhausted, and not just from crying.

Eventually, he stood and trudged toward his tent. The world felt heavier somehow, the path dim, as though the grief had darkened the ground beneath him.

When he pulled back the flap, he stopped.

There, resting gently atop his folded blanket, was an envelope. Not weathered or dirty. Clean. White. As if it had just been placed.

Alex stared for several seconds before picking it up with shaky hands. His name was scrawled on the front in a handwriting he hadn't seen in so long he almost forgot it. Almost.

He sat slowly, heart pounding now, and unfolded the letter inside.

Hey kiddo,

You've done a wonderful job keeping everyone alive.

I always knew you would.

I know things have been hard. I know people made mistakes — big ones. But you held them together. That's not easy. I'm proud of you for that.

If you want to talk, we can.

The place to meet is on the back of this note.

You may choose to bring the others, or not. That's on you. Either way, I'll be waiting.

Hope to see you soon.

— *Adam*

Alex stared at the letter, his hands trembling, eyes blurring all over again.

He flipped the page over.

There, in small handwriting, were coordinates. Ones that pointed not far — no more than half a day's travel. A real place. A real lead.

He clutched the letter to his chest, breath shallow.

Adam was alive.

He *had* to be.

No machine, no trick of the crow, no recorded message—*this* was real. This was Adam's handwriting. His words. *Him*.

Alex sat there for a long while, heart full of panic and hope all tangled together. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know who to trust with it — not yet.

But he knew one thing: tomorrow, he would go.

2/ Chapter Eight

Book II – Chapter VIII: *Choice*

The morning broke quiet.

Alex hadn't slept.

The letter never left his grip all night. He kept waking, checking, making sure it was real. By dawn, the paper was soft from being held too tightly, corners bent, edges worn. But the ink hadn't faded. Adam's words were still there.

Still waiting.

He emerged from his tent just as the sun broke across the treetops. The camp stirred slowly—Marianna feeding the fire, Marie brushing the dust from her coat, Sage checking the tools stacked along the tentline. They all looked tired, frayed at the edges like threadbare cloth.

They hadn't healed. Not really.

Not from *that*.

Alex walked toward them, hands clenched at his sides. His voice didn't shake when he spoke, but it was quieter than usual.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

Marie looked up first, blinking sleep from her eyes. "What is it?"

Alex glanced around. Levi was off by the stream. Jadrien was sharpening one of his knives behind the tents. Kevin—thankfully—was scavenging in the brush, still avoiding everyone's gaze.

It was now or never.

"I got a letter," Alex said. "Last night."

Marianna raised an eyebrow. Sage stopped her work.

Alex unfolded the note and held it out. "It was waiting for me in my tent. It's from Adam."

A silence fell that felt like the air had been sucked out of camp.

"*What?*" Marie whispered.

"I don't know how," Alex said. "But it's his handwriting. It's *him*. He said he wants to meet. Gave me a location. Not far. Just half a day from here."

Sage walked over slowly and read the note herself. Her lips parted slightly in surprise.

"It's real," she murmured.

"He might be alive," Marianna said under her breath. Her voice trembled — but not with fear. With something older. Something unfinished.

Alex folded the paper again and looked at them all.

"I'm going," he said. "With or without you. That's your choice."

Marie stepped forward, brows furrowed. "Alex—"

"I'm *going*," he repeated, firmer now. "You don't have to come. I'm not asking you to. But I *am* going."

Marianna took a breath like she wanted to argue... but didn't.

"You sure it's not a trap?" Sage asked quietly.

"No," Alex admitted. "But even if it is... it's one I need to walk into. For *him*. For all of us."

No one said anything.

The fire popped behind them, its crackle the only sound in the thickening tension.

Marie crossed her arms. "We can't tell Kevin. Or Jadrien. Or Levi. Not yet."

Alex nodded. "I wasn't going to."

"They'd try to stop us," Sage said. "Or worse."

Marianna's hands balled into fists. "We leave at dusk. Quiet. We take only what we need."

"Agreed," said Marie.

Alex looked at them all, something deep and raw moving behind his tired eyes.

"Thank you," he said softly.

And without another word, he turned away and began preparing.

2/ Chapter Nine

Book II – Chapter IX: *The Brick House*

Dusk fell like a blanket of ash, soft and dim.

The group moved quietly, every step measured. Their bags were light—only food, water, a few weapons, and what they hoped was enough courage. They said nothing as they left the camp, weaving through the tall grass and low brush that marked the edge of their temporary home. No goodbyes, no backward glances.

Just silence. And purpose.

It was Alex who led. His shoulders were tense, but his pace was steady, unwavering. The others followed behind: Marie, Marianna, and Sage. Their breath fogged slightly in the cooling air, and the orange streaks of sunset bathed the earth in a melancholy gold.

The path was easy. Familiar. No TechRot, no twisted metal roots, no corrupted trees. Only grasslands and ruined fence lines, rusted mailboxes, and the occasional silent road that hadn't seen a vehicle in years.

They were grateful for the stillness.

After an hour, Marianna broke the quiet.

"It's strange," she said. "Walking like this. Feels like a different life."

Alex glanced back. "It *was* a different life."

They walked a little longer before he spoke again, slower this time.

"Do you remember the first time Adam taught me how to fix the solar chargers?" he asked. "He didn't even explain anything at first. Just threw the wires at me and told me to try."

Marie chuckled. "Yeah. You nearly electrocuted yourself."

"I *did* electrocute myself," Alex corrected, grinning faintly. "And he laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world."

Sage smiled, a little tight around the edges. "He used to call you 'Sparkplug.'"

"He did," Alex said softly.

They kept walking. The stars came out above them, quiet companions blinking through the cloudless sky. The moonlight gave the tall grass a silver shimmer, and somewhere in the distance an owl hooted once—low and thoughtful.

“Do you remember that fire we built in the rain?” Alex asked. “When everything was soaked and the wind was against us?”

“That was when Azariah was still around,” Marianna said, her voice wistful. “He kept blowing on the embers like it would help.”

“And Adam used a broken radio coil to arc a spark through dry twine,” Marie added. “Like it was nothing.”

“We thought he was magic,” Alex murmured.

The memories clung to them, warm despite the chill. A thread tying them together as they pressed forward through the dark.

And slowly... the night began to turn pale.

By the time the sky lightened to a soft indigo, the house came into view.

It sat on a gentle rise, partially swallowed by ivy and surrounded by the soft hush of the waking world. A two-story brick structure, sturdy despite its years, with shattered windows repaired with mismatched panes of colored glass. A garden bloomed wildly at the sides, overrun but not unkempt.

And everywhere... machines.

They were small at first—two foxes sniffing the breeze from the brush, their metal tails twitching silently. Then cats, sleek and narrow-eyed, moving in perfect synchronization atop the fence. Birds lined the telephone wire—steel-feathered with blinking lenses for eyes. Wolves stood guard near the treeline, unmoving but aware.

The hounds flanked the path like statues.

All of them watched the group.

Sage stopped walking. “They knew we were coming.”

“No... they were *waiting*,” Marie said quietly.

Atop a small, rust-streaked shed near the house sat the crow.

It tilted its head slightly, eyes glowing a soft amber, before giving a low mechanical *click-click-click* with its talons on the tin roof. Then it spread its wings just enough to stretch—like a predator yawning.

Alex stepped forward first.

The door creaked as he opened it. The inside smelled like dust and old oil. There were books piled against the walls, blueprints scattered across a long table, shelves of parts sorted with meticulous care.

And then...

A voice.

Familiar. Soft. Not a recording—but real.

“Hello, old friends.”

2/ Chapter Ten

Book II – Chapter X: *Ashes Reforged*

There was a beat of stunned silence.

Then Alex stepped forward, lips parted, eyes already misting over. “Adam—”

Marie’s arm shot out, stopping him.

“Wait,” she said, her voice steady but sharp.

Alex froze, torn between joy and confusion. “But... it’s *him*.”

Marie didn’t lower her arm. “I know. But we need to hear him out first.”

Adam stood a few feet from them. He looked just as they remembered—slightly taller than most, the same calm, sharp eyes and tousled dark hair that always looked like he’d been tinkering too long to care. But now, where his right leg once had been, a crafted metal limb stretched from the knee down, subtle gears visible along the joint, polished but worn.

He didn’t look broken. Just... quieter.

Adam gave a small nod. “That’s fair,” he said, motioning to a long table surrounded by salvaged chairs. “Let’s talk.”

They sat slowly. Alex kept sneaking glances—his hands trembling in his lap. He didn’t understand why he wasn’t allowed to rush over, to throw himself into the one person he thought he’d lost forever.

Marie leaned forward, folding her hands on the table. “First question,” she said plainly, “the automatons.”

She nodded toward the window, where one of the mechanical cats paced by, its chrome joints clicking softly.

“Last time we trusted something like that,” she said, voice tightening, “Azariah died. So you’ll understand the hesitation.”

Adam nodded, the corners of his mouth drawing into something between sorrow and resolve.

“I get it. And I’d never bring TechRot near you—ever again,” he said. “These things... they’re not infected. Not even close. I designed them from scratch, built every piece with material that’s never been touched by the virus. I tested each one. Controlled AI, not sentient, not hive-mind. Just... helpers.”

He leaned back, eyes distant.

"I missed the grace of nature. The way it used to move before everything was corrupted. So I tried to recreate it."

The group was quiet. Outside, a pair of foxes trotted along the fence, stopping to nuzzle each other in silence.

Marie spoke again. "Next question," she said, her voice lower now. "Why didn't you come back? You clearly knew where we were."

Adam hesitated. For the first time since they'd walked in, he looked truly pained.

"I didn't know how to," he admitted. "After Kevin and Jadrien left me there, I—well, I didn't think I was going to survive. The hounds shredded my leg. It took eight months to recover... and most of that was just learning how to breathe without pain again."

He tapped the metal of his leg once, absently.

"I made the automatons during that time, at first just to have something that listened. Something to keep me from losing my mind."

He paused.

"After I healed, I could have come back. That's true."

"So why didn't you?" Marie asked softly.

"Because..." Adam looked down. "Jadrien's words stuck with me. That I'd just take up space. Be a burden. And with this—" he motioned to the leg again "—maybe he was right."

"You *weren't*," Alex said suddenly, voice sharp and cracking. "You *aren't*."

Adam's eyes flicked to him, then back to Marie.

"I didn't know if you'd want me back," he continued. "Or if you'd even believe I was still me. I figured you were better off moving on. But I hoped... maybe one day you'd come find me."

"And if we hadn't?" Marianna asked, quietly.

"I guess I would've kept making things," Adam said, giving a hollow smile. "Waiting."

Alex stood up abruptly, the scrape of his chair sharp against the floor. "We needed you."

Adam's gaze softened. "I know, kiddo. And I needed you too. Every day."

The room was quiet again, the only sound was the soft ticking of distant gears and the faint rustle of metal wings outside.

Adam glanced at each of them, eyes lingering just a little longer on Alex.

“I’m glad you came.”

2/ Chapter Eleven

Book II – Chapter XI: *Unspoken Things*

Adam stood in the doorway, backlit by a soft, pale light spilling in from the sky that had finally warmed to dawn.

“Well,” he said, voice casual but not light, “I should let you talk. I’ve got things to tend to anyway. Repairs, feedings. The fox automaton keeps digging into the compost bin.”

He gave them a faint smile — more weary than warm.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. Beds are upstairs. They’re clean. Mostly.” He gave a small chuckle, then turned, stepping off the porch with a soft *click* of his mechanical leg.

None of them moved. Not right away. They just watched him as he disappeared behind the shed again, the familiar ticking of his automatons resuming in the background like a steady, alien heartbeat.

The moment the door clicked shut behind him, the group let out a breath none of them realized they were holding.

“I—” Alex started, then stopped. He looked between them all, eyes flickering, unsure. “I want to stay with him.”

Marie turned to him, her voice firmer than he expected. “No.”

Alex blinked, stepping back slightly. “What? Why not? You saw him—he’s *alive*. He’s *him*.”

“I know,” she said quickly, before his voice could break again. “I know. But he’s also... not the same. None of us are. His peace—it doesn’t feel like ours. It’s... off.”

Marianna nodded slowly. “There’s something too still about this place. Too perfect.”

“He was left to rot,” Alex said, not shouting but barely keeping his emotions contained. “And he *survived*. He *built* this. How is that not a miracle?”

Robert finally spoke, arms crossed as he leaned against the wall. “It *is* a miracle. But we’ve seen miracles twist the wrong way before.”

“Then why did we even come here?” Alex asked, voice cracking. “If we weren’t ready to accept him, why did we come?”

Marie sighed, hand rubbing her temple. “Because we *wanted* to believe. But that doesn’t mean we know *how* to believe again.”

The group fell into silence. A quiet kind of silence — not judgmental, just uncertain. They stood in the dim living room of the old brick house, its walls patched up with scrap metal and draped in faded curtains, as though the house itself had forgotten what time it was supposed to belong to.

Marianna looked out the window where a pair of metal hounds slept beside the porch. “Last time we were with him... it was after Azariah died.”

No one said anything.

Marie finally sat down on one of the couches, eyes glazed with thought. “We associate Adam with the worst week of our lives. That kind of memory doesn’t wash off in one sunrise.”

Alex looked between them again, this time quieter, searching for something he couldn’t name in their faces.

“It’s not fair,” he whispered.

“It’s not,” Marie agreed gently. “But we’re here now. And we have to figure out what to do with that.”

Alex didn’t sit. He wandered to the window instead, staring out where the crow still perched motionless above the shed. It tilted its head slightly, like it knew he was watching.

Alex’s voice came again, low and uncertain. “So what now?”

No one answered. Because none of them knew.

And somewhere in the yard, behind the shed, the quiet, precise clinking of tools on metal echoed — a rhythm Adam had lived by for a year, alone.

2/ Chapter Twelve

Book II – Chapter XII: *The Shed in the Dark*

The house was quieter than any place they'd stayed in a long time.

No distant clicking of TechRot movement. No wind whistling through crumbling metal. Just the soft mechanical purring of the animal-like automatons outside and the creaks of an old home trying to remember it was a home again.

The group had claimed separate rooms, though no one slept soundly. Conversations had ended early, not because they were resolved, but because everyone had run out of questions they were brave enough to ask.

Alex lay staring at the ceiling. His hands rested over his chest, unmoving, his mind louder than the silence around him. The mattress was surprisingly soft, the blankets warm, but rest refused to come. The moonlight slanted across the floor, casting long shadows that pulsed slightly with the swaying trees outside.

He's here. He's real.

And yet... nothing felt settled.

After what felt like hours of stillness, Alex sat up, slipping from bed with careful movements. He opened the door gently, its hinges barely whispering as he crept into the hallway and then down the stairs.

The front door gave way to the cool night air, and he stepped onto the porch barefoot.

The courtyard of automatons was peaceful. The hounds lay curled together like oversized watchdogs. Birds slept on perches strung between old metal poles. The crow still sat near the shed, but it turned its head only slightly, as if acknowledging his presence before deciding it wasn't worth the energy to respond.

Alex walked past it, eyes drifting across the landscape.

Then he froze.

At the edge of the grove near the property's perimeter, a figure was moving. A lantern swung softly in their hand — casting a long, swaying silhouette over the tall grass.

Adam.

He wasn't heading toward any of the main buildings, but toward the back corner of the property — a stretch Alex hadn't explored yet. Something about Adam's posture was different. Less casual. Focused. Intentional.

Alex moved from the porch before he could think twice. Curiosity—and something deeper—tugged at his chest.

He stayed low, moving through the grass with practiced stealth. Years of surviving TechRot had taught him to breathe quietly, to place his feet carefully. He followed the faint flicker of Adam's lantern as it bobbed ahead, leading toward an old, half-sunken structure almost entirely hidden behind a curtain of ivy and fencing.

Adam reached the shed and paused.

Then, he tilted his head slightly.

"Al~ex..." he sang, low and lilting.

Alex's blood turned cold.

Adam hadn't turned around. He hadn't called out loud. But he *knew*.

Panic surged, and Alex instinctively took a step back — only to collide with something behind him.

A soft *whirr* echoed. Then the faint sound of metal shifting.

He turned his head slowly.

A wolf automaton stood behind him, eyes dim but focused. Its metal snout brushed against his shoulder, then nudged him — not harshly, but insistently — toward the shed.

Alex's breath caught in his throat.

The wolf nudged again, more firmly this time.

With trembling steps, Alex moved forward.

Adam stood calmly by the shed door, expression unreadable in the moonlight. He smiled, not unkindly.

"Curiosity gets the best of us all," he said softly. "But that's alright. You were meant to see this anyway."

Alex didn't respond. His eyes flicked between the wolf and Adam. His stomach twisted with something he couldn't name — fear, maybe. Or awe. Or both.

Adam turned to the shed door and placed his hand on it.

"There's something I've been waiting to show someone," he said, voice lower now, tinged with something almost reverent.

The old lock clicked open.

He looked back at Alex.

“Come on, kiddo. Let me show you what I’ve been working on.”

Then he opened the door.

2/ Chapter Thirteen

Book II – Chapter XIII: *The Door That Shouldn't Open*

The door creaked open with a groan that sounded older than the house itself.

Inside was blackness. Not just darkness — but a thick, swallowing void that seemed to consume the lantern light Adam held at his side.

Alex stepped back, the tension in his chest growing into something colder, sharper.

“Adam... what is this?” he asked, voice barely more than a whisper.

Adam didn't respond. He simply stepped aside, one hand still resting lightly on the shed door as if holding it open against some unseen weight.

A faint hiss escaped from within. Then, a green mist rolled out across the dirt, curling like living tendrils over the ground. It shimmered slightly under the moonlight — not bright, but familiar.

Too familiar.

Alex's eyes widened.

No. No, no—

He turned, bolting away from the shed—but Adam's foot swept out, catching him mid-step.

Alex hit the dirt hard, the wind knocked from his lungs. Panic clawed its way up his throat as he scrambled, trying to rise.

“Adam! What are you doing?!” he shouted.

“I'm sorry, kiddo.”

Adam's voice cracked.

From the darkness of the shed, something surged.

A slick, sinewy tentacle — green-veined and pulsing with sickly, biomechanical life — lunged from the shadows and wrapped tightly around Alex's leg.

“No—!” Alex screamed, grabbing at the ground, clawing for purchase as he was pulled backward.

Adam didn't move.

Tears slid down his face silently, cutting clean lines down his dirt-covered cheeks.

Alex's hands grasped for anything. Rocks, grass, dirt. His fingers left trenches in the soil as the tentacle dragged him closer to the darkness, to the place where the gas seeped from and the air crackled with unnatural tension.

"I'm sorry..." Adam whispered again, eyes not leaving Alex's.

The shed door slammed shut.

Silence fell over the grove once more.

Morning came slowly, and with it, unease.

Marie was the first to rise, her eyes bleary as she stepped outside the house into the soft morning light. The automatons were still there — some perched, some walking — but she noticed something was off.

No sign of Adam.

And more importantly, no sign of Alex.

By mid-morning, concern turned to dread.

"He wouldn't just leave," Marie muttered, pacing.

Marianna agreed, and Sage had already started checking the edge of the grove for tracks. The house was searched top to bottom, Levi trying to stay calm but his movements increasingly frantic.

They spent the day scouring the surrounding forest, splitting into pairs. But there was nothing. No footprints. No sound. Not even a trace of Adam's presence.

As the sun dipped behind the tree line and long shadows began to stretch over the property, Adam finally returned.

He walked out of the woods quietly, carrying a small bundle of firewood in his arms, face unreadable.

Marie rushed toward him. "Where the hell have you been? Where's Alex?"

Adam didn't stop walking.

"He left," Adam said flatly. "He went back to camp early this morning."

"What? Why would he do that alone?" Marianna asked, brows furrowing.

Adam didn't answer.

"He just... left?"

“Yes.” His voice was emotionless. “He said he needed space. I didn’t stop him.”

Silence rippled through the group. It didn’t feel right — didn’t *sound* right. Something in Adam’s voice was off. Too rehearsed. Too hollow.

“The forest isn’t safe at night,” he added, shifting the firewood in his arms. “You should all get some rest. We’ll leave tomorrow. Early.”

Sage stepped forward, staring at him.

“Adam,” she said cautiously. “You’re not saying everything.”

He looked up at her. But I didn’t speak.

The moment hung heavy.

Then, with an calm smile, he turned toward the house.

“We should sleep.”

And just like that, he walked inside.

Leaving the others in the dark.

Literally — and now, deeply — figuratively.

2/ Chapter Fourteen

Book II – Chapter XIV: *Echoes in the Dark*

Marie's eyes snapped open.

The room was wrong.

Cold stone surrounded her. The air was thick, damp, and choked with the smell of rust and decay.

She tried to sit up, but her limbs were weak — heavy, like she'd been drugged.

Dim pulses of green light traced the edges of the room, just enough to see the writhing, sluggish movements of tentacles that lined the walls and ceiling. Biomechanical. Glinting slightly in the dark.

"Where the hell—"

She wasn't the only one waking.

Marianna groaned from her left, eyes wide with confusion and growing horror as she sat up.

"What... what is this?"

Sage stirred next. Robert. Levi. Even Jadrien, though he looked worse than the rest — pale and shaking, mumbling something incoherent under his breath.

And then...

"Alex!" Marie gasped, crawling toward the corner of the cell where the youngest of them sat, knees pulled to chest, face pale and haunted.

"I—I didn't know," he whispered. "I didn't know this is what he meant."

Before Marie could answer, the sound of footsteps echoed outside their cell.

Click... click... click...

A figure approached slowly, pacing along a metal catwalk that overlooked their prison.

It was Adam.

His posture was stiff. His movements oddly graceful, like a puppet with strings too taut. His eyes glowed a deep, unnatural orange, swirling faintly with the same green shimmer of the mist from the shed.

He stopped at the edge of the platform, crouched, and leaned forward.

A smile tugged at his face. Too wide.

“Hey, friends,” he said, voice light and casual — a mimicry of Adam’s usual tone. “Comfy?”

No one answered.

His gaze flicked briefly to Alex.

“In case there were doubts, yes — he’s alive. Kept him safe. Had to. You wouldn’t understand just how valuable he is.” He tapped the side of his temple. “But I do.”

Marianna stood, hands curling into fists. “That’s not Adam. Those aren’t his eyes.”

The creature smiled wider. “Yes, you’re right, as always, kid. It’s not *him*. But I do *express* him. Every locked-away feeling. Every drop of rage. Every second of being abandoned. Left behind in the dirt to rot. To starve. To crawl.”

His voice deepened slightly — distorted at the edges. Less human.

Alex backed away, breathing ragged.

“Why are we here?” Marie snapped.

The thing that wore Adam’s face tilted its head.

“Because you’re useful,” it said. “You see, human DNA — your genome — can revert TechRot. Not completely, not yet. But I’m close. With *him*”—he pointed at Alex—“I’m even closer. Your little protector has something special inside. Something new.”

Jadrien stumbled forward, eyes wild. “You’re lying. You’re using him.”

“Oh, of course I am,” the voice crooned. “But not like you did.”

It stood.

The catwalk dimmed behind it as it walked, disappearing into shadow. For a moment, there was silence.

Then the ceiling above them creaked. Slid open.

Something began to lower.

It was immense. A tangle of churning metal and flesh. A hulking, octopus-like TechRot mass that pulsed with green veins and orange eyes, its tentacles connected to every wall of the cell.

One of the tentacles slithered downward and coiled protectively around Adam as he stood still, letting it rise behind him like a throne of disease.

With a flick of its head, a hiss filled the room.

A gas vented from hidden ports along its body — thick, heavy, sickly sweet and tinged the same color as every nightmarish memory they'd fought so hard to escape.

"No!" Marie shouted, covering her mouth, trying to pull the others back.

But it was no use.

The gas was fast.

Sage collapsed first, then Robert and Levi. Marianna tried to hold on, swaying, but her knees buckled seconds later.

Marie's eyes locked with Alex's as the world started spinning.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

And then he was gone — his eyes rolled back, limbs limp.

Marie tried to reach for him... but her vision darkened, her thoughts fragmenting into fog.

The last thing she saw before the void claimed her was the thing wearing Adam's face turning to walk away, surrounded by metal and rot.

And silence.

2/ Chapter Fifteen

Book II – Chapter XV: *Things We Left Behind*

They awoke in pieces — groggy, slow, each movement dulled like their bodies were wrapped in lead.

The first to open her eyes was Marie.

She couldn't move.

Thick TechRot tentacles slithered from the walls and ceiling, binding her wrists and ankles to the metal table she lay on. She tried to twist free, but the living cables only tightened, responding to her panic with mechanical indifference.

To her right, Marianna was restrained in the same way — already awake, her face pale and jaw clenched tight.

Jadrien. Sage. Robert. Levi. All of them, trapped on separate medical tables. Eyes wide, breaths sharp and frantic.

Alex was furthest from her — the last to stir. His head lulled to one side, eyes flickering open as the situation came into terrifying focus.

A familiar pair of footsteps echoed through the chamber.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Adam emerged from the shadows, arms behind his back. That unnatural orange glow still tainted his eyes. He looked too calm. Too casual.

"I'll be nice," he said smoothly, voice laced with a toxic politeness. "We'll talk before I get what I need."

He stopped beside Jadrien first, tilting his head like a curious animal.

"So tell me..." he murmured, smile sharp.

"How was it... *betraying* me, Jadrien?"

Jadrien's throat bobbed. "You weren't supposed to survive— I— It wasn't like that!"

"No?" Adam's grin didn't falter. "You threatened Kevin. You kept your mouth shut and left me for dead. That's the definition of betrayal, isn't it?"

Jadrien went silent, eyes filling with shame, but said nothing more.

Adam stepped slowly past him, coming to Marie's table.

"And you," he said. "How long did it take you to replace me, Marie?"

Marie stared him down. "No one replaced you. We *survived* without you."

"But that's the thing." Adam leaned in. "I was still there. A full week before I passed out. Bleeding, crawling, screaming your names until my throat gave out. Did you even look?"

"We thought you were dead," she hissed. "We buried what we had left."

"Ah. Convenient."

He stepped back, and his tone turned colder.

"People don't abandon those they care about," he said flatly. "Only the ones they were *using*."

The words echoed across the chamber like a verdict. No one could respond.

And then, Adam's eyes settled on Alex.

His expression shifted.

Softer. Regretful.

"Alex," he said, almost choking the name. "My dear friend. I'm sorry I had to use you."

The orange glow in his eyes flickered.
Then vanished.

His posture buckled, like something inside snapped — and the real Adam surfaced for just a moment.

"I didn't want to," he whispered, voice shaking. "I swear I didn't—"

The TechRot tendrils around his legs snapped taut, jerking him backward.

His eyes reignited, orange once more.

Without another word, he turned from them and disappeared into the dark, his silhouette merging with the octopus-like entity that had dragged them here.

Silence.

And the sound of metal breathing.

2/ Chapter Sixteen

Book II – Chapter XVI: *Flicker*

It started with a twitch.

Just one.

The twitch of a finger. Then the tilt of a head. The glow in Adam's eyes blinked off like a faulty light, revealing dull, human brown underneath. His breath hitched. His shoulders slumped. And for a moment, the monster was gone.

The room was still. The TechRot entity's tendrils hissed, reacting to the shift in energy — unsure of whether to recoil or tighten.

Adam staggered to the far wall and grabbed at his head, fingers curling in his hair.

"No, no— stop— not now—" he whispered, shaking violently.

Inside the cell, the group remained bound, wide-eyed, unmoving, unsure whether to hope or fear.

Alex strained against his restraints. "Adam?"

His name hit like a bullet.

Adam turned toward him — not with malice, but desperation.

"It's me," he choked out. "I don't have long."

The orange glow began to bleed faintly into the whites of his eyes again. He winced and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling something out. A small, rusted key on a thin chain.

He stumbled toward Alex's table, fighting every step like his own muscles were rebelling. He gritted his teeth, jaw clenched so tight it looked like it might shatter.

"I... I already made it," he breathed, pressing the key into Alex's palm. "The cure. I had it weeks ago. That thing— it doesn't *want* it. It wants *you all* dead. It doesn't need me anymore. I'm just—"

The orange flooded back.

Adam jerked like a marionette on severed strings, stumbling backward and slamming against the far wall. He screamed — a horrible, ragged cry that was too human to ignore.

The glow flickered again, warping, distorting — like his very skin was resisting the thing crawling underneath it.

He looked at Alex, one last time.

“Get out,” he whispered hoarsely. “Get out and don’t look back.”

And then he collapsed — and the glow returned with brutal finality.

The orange-eyed shell of Adam stood again. Straightened his posture. Cracked his neck.

When he spoke, the voice was smooth again. Detached.

“Nice try.”

And with that, the creature snapped its fingers — and the lights overhead plunged the room into darkness.

2/ Chapter Seventeen

Book II – Chapter XVII: The Price of Redemption

Smoke filled the air like a breath held too long, heavy and clinging to every surface. The lab pulsed with warning lights—red, urgent, flickering in a cadence that matched the growing tension. Alex's wrists burned from the coarse grip of TechRot tentacles that had bound him to the surgical table. His mind screamed to move, to run, to fight, but his limbs were still pinned. Beside him, the others writhed in similar states—Marie, Jadrien, Marianna, Kevin, Levi—each struggling, each terrified.

And across the room, Adam fought for his soul.

The man who had once been the group's brightest light stood at war with himself. His form twitched, convulsing as the orange glow flickered in his eyes—bright one moment, dim the next. He clutched at his skull as if trying to tear the possession out by force.

"You have to listen to me," Adam rasped, his voice human again for just a breath. "I built the cure. It's real. It works. But the TechRot—" he winced, the glow surging back—"it doesn't want a cure."

The TechRot lashed out in frustration, spawning twisted canines from its darkness—mechanical and organic fused in terrifying symmetry. Their jaws clicked open, dripping with black sludge, eyes glowing like burning coals. They sniffed the air and turned toward Alex.

The canine automatons pounced.

Alex sucked in a breath and twisted just as one lunged, its teeth scraping across the edge of the metal table. With a violent jerk, his left hand slipped free. He didn't think—there was no time to think. He swung his arm up and grabbed the scalpel Adam had dropped earlier in his inner conflict.

The second canine dove for him, but Alex rolled off the table just in time, landing hard on his shoulder. Pain exploded through his chest, but he scrambled to his feet. With shaking hands, he sawed at the tentacles holding Marie.

"Alex!" she cried, her voice hoarse with fear and desperation. "Behind you!"

He ducked, barely missing a clawed paw meant to decapitate him. The scalpel slashed through the last strand binding Marie, and she rolled to the floor and kicked the attacking creature square in the jaw, sending it staggering back.

"Help the others!" Alex yelled.

Together, they moved in desperate coordination, cutting the others free as the canines swirled around them. Jadrien grabbed a loose pipe and used it to bludgeon one of the beasts away from Kevin. Levi used a burning torch from the wall to drive back another.

Amid the chaos, Adam clutched the main control console. His hands flew across the interface, even as his body convulsed from the internal war raging within him.

"Do it," he muttered to himself. "You have to do it. For them. For everything."

He slammed his palm against a red button.

A low hum began, deep and resonant, as vials around the lab began to shatter, releasing a fine mist. Green at first—then clear. The infected vines recoiled. The TechRot screamed. Not in words, but in a raw, guttural pulse that echoed in every skull like nails on bone.

"RUN!" Adam screamed, his eyes briefly clear again. "The lab—it'll blow once the dispersal is done!"

The group hesitated—none of them wanting to leave him.

Alex locked eyes with Adam. "Come with us!"

"I can't," Adam replied, coughing blood now. "They're in me. If I leave, the infection does too. The cure—needs this."

Alex shook his head furiously. "We can fix this! We always fix this!"

"Not this time, kiddo," Adam smiled. It was tired. It was real.

Alex hesitated a second too long. A canine lunged. This time, Levi tackled it mid-air, roaring in defiance as it knocked him against the wall. Marianna and Marie grabbed Alex by the arms and dragged him, even as he kicked and screamed for Adam.

"No! No! I won't leave him again!"

"You have to!" Marie shouted over the rising hum. "He wants this—he's saving us!"

The exit door was barely visible through the smoke. The TechRot was unraveling, vines curling in agony, machines short-circuiting and collapsing. Alex twisted just in time to see Adam collapse near the console, one final smile on his face.

They burst through the door.

Alex stopped at the threshold.

He turned—just once—and saw Adam raise a hand in farewell.

Then everything behind them exploded in a flash of light and wind and fire.

The blast hurled them into the dirt outside. They rolled down the hillside, coughing, crying, shielding each other from the debris raining down. The automatons around the

compound—canines, foxes, crows—fell one by one, lifeless and silent. The forest beyond shivered as if exhaling.

And then... silence.

Smoke billowed from the brick house, now half-consumed by fire. The morning sun rose in slow defiance over the ruins.

The group lay sprawled in the grass, bruised, bleeding, and breathless. No one spoke for several long minutes.

Alex curled into himself and sobbed.

Marie crawled over and wrapped her arms around him.

"He saved us," she whispered, voice breaking. "He saved us all."

Jadrien sat up slowly, covered in soot, staring back at the smoking ruins. "After everything we did to him... he still saved us."

Kevin nodded, silent and ashamed.

Marianna lay flat on her back, staring at the sky. "That was the real Adam. That was him all along."

Alex finally sat up, wiping the tears from his eyes. His hands trembled as he held something—something small.

The key Adam had given him.

It glowed faintly in the morning light. The last piece of Adam, still warm with purpose.

"Then we don't let it be for nothing," Alex said, voice hoarse but steady.

He stood.

The others followed.

Together, they turned from the ruins, smoke curling behind them like ghosts from the past, and began the long walk back.

Adam had made the ultimate sacrifice.

Now, it was their turn to make it count.

2/ Chapter Eighteen

Book II – Chapter XVIII: *The Garden We Grew*

The world healed slowly, like a body stitched together by time and memory.

It wasn't perfect — no world born from ashes ever was — but the rot was gone. The skies were clean again. Cities were rebuilt, and nature rebalanced itself. There were still scars in the earth, monuments of ruin that reminded people of what once almost ended them. But those scars were lined with flowers now. Renewal. Purpose.

The group — what remained of it — each chose their own path when the rebuilding began.

Marie found her calling in a school just outside one of the new cities. She taught not just reading or numbers, but survival, history, ethics — everything they had learned the hard way. She taught them about infection and cure, pain and healing. She never named herself a hero, but in the eyes of her students, she was one.

Marianna disappeared into a quiet town nestled in the hills. There, she lived with her partner and raised two children — strong, curious, beautiful kids who never had to see the world as it had been. She gardened, cooked, protected her peace. When asked about the past, she would smile, shake her head, and say, "You wouldn't believe it."

Jadrien, to everyone's surprise — maybe even his own — wrote books. Dozens of them. Stories of the old world, the infestation, the firelit nights they'd shared. The books were stylized, dramatic, often funny, but they held truth. Truth wrapped in fiction. In every library, his works were tucked somewhere between myth and memoir.

Michael went back to what he knew — structure, purpose, duty. He rose through the new military's ranks with steadiness and steel resolve. He trained the next generation not in war, but in discipline and choice. Peacekeeping, not power. He kept a photo of their group tucked into his vest pocket every day.

Robert vanished for a while. When word finally caught up to him, he was living in the countryside alone — quiet, simple, untouched by the noise. He didn't want medals or purpose. He tended to an orchard, brewed his own coffee, and once in a while, sent short letters with one or two lines that always made someone cry.

Sage became a star.

Her first movie — *Ashes and Automatons* — was a cinematic retelling of their story, stylized, sure, but raw with truth. It earned awards. It made people cry. It made people remember. She never hid who she was, never glamorized it. And in every interview, she said, "I'm just playing the life we all lived."

Alex became the youngest head inventor the new military had ever seen. The boy who once hid behind corners now stood behind schematics and blueprints, building defense systems not to

dominate but to protect. He never stopped tinkering. He never stopped imagining. His inventions saved lives — hundreds of them. But every prototype bore the initials A.H. etched somewhere small and hidden, in memory.

But even as they moved on, even as the years settled like dust over the past, there was one thing they never let go of.

The old brick house.

They maintained it together. No one lived in it. No one altered it. It stayed exactly as it had been — as Adam had made it. They repaired the roof when it sagged, repainted the porch, even let vines grow over one side, just the way he'd liked. It became a ritual.

Once a year — always the same day — they returned.

They'd sit in the courtyard, sometimes in silence, sometimes in laughter. They'd cook together, drink, share stories. Sometimes new friends or family members came with them, but the core group always found time. It was their place. Their shared breath of the past.

Alex was the last to arrive this year. He carried a satchel full of tools and a box of preserved tea he knew Marie liked. His hair had grown longer, tucked back now, and he wore a coat with far too many inside pockets. The others were already there, already laughing about something Robert had said.

They embraced him one by one — older now, softer in places, scarred in others, but whole. Somehow, miraculously, whole.

The sun dipped low.

They lit lanterns.

They sat around the same fire pit they had once feared for their lives beside. And now, they talked about lives lived — about children, about mistakes, about roles they never imagined they'd play.

It was Sage who said it first. "Do you think he'd be proud?"

No one had to ask who.

"I think," said Marie, pouring herself a cup of tea, "he'd be *smirking*."

That drew laughter.

"I think he'd say, 'Took you long enough,'" Jadrien added with a grin.

"I think he'd tell me I should bring the kids around more," Marianna teased, prompting another round of chuckles.

And then...

There it was.

A sharp, deliberate *click*. A rhythmic metallic tap against stone.

They turned.

From the shadow of the treeline, it stepped forward. Sleek black metal, eyes glowing softly like ember. Perched proud and regal, its head tilted at a curious angle.

The crow.

The one that had always watched. The one that had vanished when Adam had.

It stood on the low brick wall surrounding the fire pit.

And then—

In Adam's voice, familiar and bright:

“Hey, so how are we doing today?”

The group froze.

Not in fear.

But in something like awe.

And in that silence — the last echo of the past and the promise of the future — the fire crackled gently.

2/ Finale

The End

Thanks For Reading