



Corona 22

A YA action-adventure by Jordan Wakefield



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*JordanWakefield.com*

*JordanWakefieldAuthor@gmail.com*

**This book contains graphic themes and content and is not for the faint of heart.**

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*Email me if any attributions were missed or you have any comments.*



***WELCOME TO THE NEW NORMAL***

*It’s 2022.*

*A mutated strain of COVID-19 has killed off most adults, resulting in anarchy.*

*Civil war rages across America between scattered groups of teens and young adults.*

*An unlikely group reluctantly joins forces: Extremists, revolutionaries, and everyone between.*

*The only thing they seem to agree on: Sticking together is their best chance at survival.*

*Some take it as an opportunity to reinvent themselves, finding new identities, new purpose, and new families. Others revel in the chaos, seeking power at any cost.*

*First in the CORONA series, CORONA 22 is full of breakneck turns and a host of colorful personalities guaranteed to thrill you from start to finish.*

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# Dedication

*To my loved ones - my family, friends, and my partner, who helped bring this work to life,*

*To all humanity and those who are scared - may you find peace, love, and happiness,*

*To my readers - may you enjoy the many characters you find in this book and in your life, and may the world spin gently for you,*

*Thank you.*

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THE WORLD WILL MELT AND BURN

IN A BLAZING BLUR OF MADMEN

AND MORE THAN A FEW DAYS AND TIMES,

FOLKS WILL COME TO SEE THEM

###

### 1 - Left behind

Lyle stood over his parents’ grave. It took most of the day to dig, and not a single scoop was done without effort. The cold bit his chapped fingers through cheap polyester gloves, but they were all he had to wear. The exertion made him sweat, filling his body with contradictory waves of cold and warmth.

He soon threw the torn black gloves off and felt the weathered, splintered wood chafing his hands. The skin was blistered and calloused, but it’d grown thicker the past winter.

The thermometer on the deck out back had just started reading above freezing, so he knew he had to give their bodies back to the yawning spring earth. He wanted to bury them in separate plots, side by side, but the ground was still hard. Their bodies were rigid and unworkable, though he had reluctantly let them thaw just to move them.

He dragged the sour husks of the souls that had given him life into the middle of the yard. The burial hole was deep and wide, like the hole in his heart they’d leave.

He stared into the pit. It pulled on him with its own mysterious gravity. The heavy memories of his short life swirled inside dirt and clay, toward nothingness. Though the trench invited Lyle, he pushed his parent’s bodies in with a grunt and swallowed his tears.

He tried to arrange their rigid limbs into something respectful, his mother’s arm draped over his father’s chest like lovers. But every attempt to manipulate their ghastly white bodies created real or imagined sounds of cracking, snapping bones that filled his throat with bile, so he left them as best he could.

He hoped to remember them as he knew them, living and lying together in peace, but he knew it wouldn’t be that easy. There were too many memories of them sick and dying, struggling for air and water, the world around them burning with violence and explosions and cracks of gunfire.

The dirt piled slowly over like the sands of time. The sun dropped in the sky, and chill and darkness crept up on the world.

Back inside, he heated canned chicken in a scratched-up steel saucepan on the stove, thankful the propane tank outside still had a little fuel left in it. He had stopped using it for heat months ago, because the propane went quickly and his family’s big house, thirty feet from the water, was badly insulated. It had been a cold winter.

He supposed the house belonged to him now. The heir of an empty house and a ruined world. The thought sent a chill through his body and nearly stole his appetite, but he kept stirring; he was always hungry.

The tossed-together mush of peppered chicken and rice reminded him of the time when memes from Facebook and Instagram whirled around in his mind, and the minds of everyone his age, daily. Nonsense mixed with ill-tasting rubbish. When awkward silences were filled by friends showing each other short homemade clips on Vine and TikTok, before President Trump had declared the latter a tool of Chinese cyber warfare.

Lyle missed these apps and the ocean of vacuous entertainment and titillating “fake news”, though he had no idea what was true or false anymore. Last he heard, Toronto was declared a Marxist-Leninist state, and professor and public speaker Jordan Peterson led a sizable coalition of resistance, fighting in the streets.

He wondered if that cartoonish picture wasn’t better than the likely truth, that everywhere was shit-in-flames and starvation in the cold. At least one possibility was entertaining.

He’d forgotten how disgusted he became with the ever-mixing stream of jokes and fabrications, how life had become a postmodern art horror no later than 2015, amplified exponentially after society began to shut down in 2020. The noise stopped when the internet died just a year later. Now it was 2022 and the silence was deafening. He could swear he missed all the chaos and noise, all the colorful info, truth mixed with lies. At least it was something.

But the internet wasn’t coming back, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that anyone left alive out there would be pointing a loaded gun at him. He wondered every day how he had been mostly left alone here, how wandering looters hadn’t come and put him out of his misery.

There was little left here but canned goods his parents had bought, but it was something. All the luxuries—bottled water, toilet paper, alcohol, cigarettes—went fast. Today was chicken, but his normal fare was lemon-peppered canned tuna mixed with rice, with some baked beans to sweeten the deal if his stomach was upset from the boiled pond water. He could never filter the slimy taste away. There was rainwater or melted snow if he was lucky. Rains were rare, and maybe that made them taste better. Snow was better than the pond, but it always seemed to taste of dirt.

His older brother Peter could be the heir to the house still. He wanted that to comfort him, the possibility that his blood might still be out there. But after the first few weeks, things had gotten really bad, neighbor turned on neighbor and states fell.

No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t shake the feeling that his older brother was dead. Dead like most people.

He didn’t know his brother well. They had never gotten along. But knowing he’d never get the chance to fix things made not knowing him better seem like the worst mistake of Lyle’s life.

The canned chicken crackled and he shut off the meager flame, holding his hands above the heated metal for every last bit of warmth. Staying wrapped in a thick blanket, wearing shoes inside and two pairs of socks all the time, warming his hand over each night’s bland dinner; it had all become ritual as much as necessity.

It wasn’t much of a life, but it was survival, even though it felt empty and pointless. “What am I going on for?” Lyle thought aloud or silently, sometimes too many times a day to count. He knew it was for his parent’s sake. If they were still around... *if* they were still around...

*Stay alive,* they had told him as they got sicker and sicker, as viral pneumonia strangled their fluid-filled lungs. Dad had fought hard, but he went first. Mom was barely able to speak by then, and collapsed just days after. The broken look in her teary, bloodshot eyes said her heart was the last domino needed to finish off the strongest woman he ever knew.

Death peered from every crack and crevice and corner like clawing shadows or a dirty secret. And like a dirty secret, a dreadful thought invaded Lyle’s mind every moment his prefrontal cortex wasn’t shut down from cold and hunger: The dead man in the bushes by the dock.

*...And he remembered it all...*

It was two nights before Mom passed. Lyle was keeping constant vigil, hoping that sustained effort and sheer intent would save her, that she couldn’t pass if he never slept. He wouldn’t let her die alone in the night like Dad.

The terrible anxiety kept him on a thin tight rope between awake and nodding off. He’d startle awake and jump to her bedside, waiting for the ringing in his ears to be replaced by her struggling, rasping breaths. She was too fatigued to move on her own, but in so much pain that she fought weakly when he tried to position her to try to drain her lungs.

Lyle was about to move her when there was a crash downstairs. He froze, listened, but heard nothing more but Mom’s watery breathing, which had gotten worse. He put his hand on her wrist, bracing himself to stir her and see her half-sane and tortured eyes, coughing blood and mucus. But it was something to see her move even a little, to see that she was still fighting this illness, that she was still a person, still alive.

Downstairs, there was a loud clatter as the shelves in the kitchen gave out and spilled all the dishes. The raccoons were getting desperate; he gulped, but just to be sure there was his father’s Colt 1911 holstered on his hip. He put his hand on it, thinking of Dad teaching him to shoot when he was twelve. His dad was a master shooter who knew the ins and outs of every firearm, the perfect method for quick, accurate, reliable fire. Lyle just knew which end the bullets came out.

He snuck out of the bedroom, wood floorboards creaking beneath. He scowled at the traitorous old house that had become both enemy and fortress in the haunted tangles of his mind. He crept down the steps, anxiously thumbing the button of his high lumen flashlight.

The kitchen was just around the corner, but heavy steps on the floor betrayed something larger and much worse than a raccoon. Images of starved black bears and Jersey Devils and things that go bump in the night. More pots and dishes smashed on the floor and Lyle instinctively switched the flashlight on.

Like a sudden nightmare, a ragged man in front of the sink stood blinded in the spotlight, a crazed look in his eyes.

“Stop!” Lyle screamed, fumbling for his handgun and the strobe switch on the flashlight, but it turned off, drowning the room in darkness just before he saw something metal in the man’s hand.

Lyle fired and a glass exploded next to the intruder’s head. The room lit up golden with each shot, the heavy .45 caliber gun jumping in his scared hands. The man flashed and flashed again, a little closer each time, and flash, and flash, and flash, and flash, and flash— and the intruder was gone in the deaf and dark.

Lyle could feel-hear his thumping pulse, ringing, rapid breathing, the click of the empty gun. The flashlight turned on and the man was lying on the floor.

Lyle forced his heavy, shaking legs to move toward the kitchen, step by step, his mind gone with his hearing. The man’s black shirt was shredded and drenched, shining in the light. His chest rose and then fell with his last gurgles. Silence.

No, ringing.

Ringing forever.

The pool of blood grew around the body. Smell of copper and gunpowder stung Lyle’s nose. The crimson puddle reached the dead man’s hand and the metal thing next to it. Lyle kicked it with his foot. His heart sank into his shoes. A can opener.

Half an hour he sat on the floor with the dead intruder, wishing he could take the bullets back, bring him back to life. He tried to force out tears, but nothing came. He worked up the courage to search him, hoping to find a weapon, a pocket knife, anything to absolve himself from this terrible crime. But the man’s pockets were empty, filled with holes like his chest.

He tried to pick him up, sling him over his shoulder, but the body was heavier than the world. And colder. And damp with blood. Lyle slipped and fell in it, lying there for a moment, feeling as dead as the murdered man next to him. He thought of his father, who lay outside frozen in the snow, and of his mother, who writhed upstairs in her fever dreams and painful waking moments, struggling for each second of life. And for the millionth-and-one time, he wondered what all the struggle was for.

He dragged him out the back door by both ankles, into the snow. The winter hit hard, biting his skin through the bloodsoaked parts screaming in the cold wind. He looked away as he passed by his dad, though he couldn’t make him out here in the dim moonlight. Just the glittering pond wrapped by quiet trees that dreamed the dream of the sleeping earth and its dead.

Toward the water, he heaved him into some bushes next to the dock, where they used to dump brush. The brittle branches snapped under the weight of the body. He hoped leaves would blow over and cover the man, but the world was frozen into place like stone. Only the winds and snows moved out here, and the dark skies and the twinkling surface of the water.

The body was facedown. He noticed something in his back pocket and took it out, a thin old leather wallet, worn and scratched and tattered. His hands shook violently as he ripped out the contents, some old bills, debit cards, savings cards for stores and restaurants from when civilized society existed. And a driver’s license. Lyle clenched it in his hand and pocketed it. He turned the man’s body over to stare at the stars. His eyes were already freezing open.

Back inside, Lyle sat for a long time, cold and still.

He took out the ID. He could barely read the name, but he would never forget that face. Smiling. Clean shaven. Hair cut neat. Dark, handsome eyes.

Gaunt. Starving. Crazed. Terrified. Dead, staring up lifelessly at a world that kept turning.

He clenched his fist and stuffed it in his pocket, trading the ID card for a loaded magazine and placing it in his pistol with a *CLTAAK* sound. He’d clean up the glass and blood tomorrow.

He wandered back upstairs, dazed, and sat in the chair next to his sleeping mom’s bed, to watch her chest rise and fall weakly. He was almost happy she wasn’t conscious right now to ask what all the commotion downstairs was. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about falling asleep tonight.

### 2 - A girl and her dog

Something rustled through the bushes in a forest. A stout little dog with long, upturned ears and a mottled brindle coat.

“Cudo!” a girl’s voice called in the distance. His ear pricked, but beside that he didn’t seem to pay any mind. His focus was entirely on the fantastic new smell he’d just picked up on, and he continued his search.

“What’re you doing, little guy?” The girl ran over to him. She was short and pale, with freckled cheeks hidden by dirt and orangish brown curly hair that covered much of her face. Her scavenged snow pants and thick grey winter coat, despite being practically in tatters, offered more protection from the unforgiving bugs and brambles than the thin bike shorts and baggy brown t-shirt she had underneath. Her too-big black sneakers were already falling apart too, but the large brown satchel slung around her front was mostly intact and its contents jingled lightly as she moved.

She knelt down, catching her breath, and rubbed his spiny back affectionately. He didn't react, his attention and snoot were buried deep in the bushes. “You’re all skin and bones now,” she remarked, half to herself as she traced the protruding ribs of his barrel-shaped chest. “I wish I had more food for you.”

As if on cue, he lunged into the matted leaf carpet and after a bit of pawing and digging, produced a hunk of a cooked halved bird in his mouth. It was grey, clearly starting to mold, and had mostly been picked clean, but to him it was the meal of a lifetime.. He started crunching the thin ribs and shriveled ligaments, scarfing them down with a gruesome chomping, gurgling sound, barely chewing before he swallowed the crunchy splintering pieces.

“I shouldn’t let you eat that, with all the bones in it...” she began, but was interrupted as she remembered how it was getting harder to sneak into houses to look for food. As if overnight, there were suddenly more looters around than she had ever seen and it was all she could do to avoid running into them. Most of the houses were picked clean anyway, it wasn’t worth the risk. She sighed and let him keep at his treasure, confident enough that his steel stomach would digest it just fine.

Her stomach growled, watching him greedily gobble it up with a sound like a cat gagging on a furball. “Sometimes I wish I were a dog too.” She lamented. She knew the good-natured dog would share it with her if she *really* wanted it. Seemingly reading her mind, he looked up at her with his big, uneven eyes, as if to ask if she wanted to partake. She shook her head, smiling, and he continued mawing on it till the big pelvic and sternum bones were nearly all that was left of the little carcass.

She reached into her satchel for her half-empty water bottle. She considered it’s meager contents gloomily, knowing she would have to find more water soon. It wasn’t easy. She relied mostly on rainwater, but the April showers were becoming less frequent and May hadn’t yet brought any flowers, nor much else in the way of relief.

At least the change of seasons meant the long nights spent shivering beneath the stars with Cudo bundled against her chest in her dad’s old oversized sleeping bag were nearing the end again. This winter had been their hardest, but with it’s warmth the approaching springtime also brought renewed hope.

She looked down at Cudo, who was now licking his lips clean and sniffing around in the dirt for any bits of food he might have dropped. The little scamp was the only thing that had kept her body and spirit from freezing during these long few months. She hoped he was happy to have her around too.

“Just you and me,” she promised him when they first escaped the FEMA emergency juvenile protection camp months back.

They had been driven out by bigger, meaner kids who had effectively become the bosses of the camp when all of the adult workers fled or died of the virus. They pushed her around, took her things, and threatened to “*eat that dirty mutt when they got hungry enough*.” That had been the final straw.

She stole away that same night, whispering to him in the dark: “I’d never let them eat you. I’ll never let anyone hurt you.”

So far she’d kept her promise.

Cudo gnarled incessantly on the leftover bones, though they could both tell he wasn’t going to get much more out of it. Suddenly he stopped, his ears pricking and turning like a satellite antenna. She crouched down reflexively and pulled him from his noisy meal, having learned to rely on his instincts.

He groaned in annoyance, pawing toward the bones stubbornly and poising himself forward, so that his weight was leveraged directly toward his goal.

He was bullheaded like that, being part pitbull, obstinate even. But she loved him for it. He had a huge mind of his own, simple as its aims were, but he didn’t have a mean bone in his body.

She had attempted to send him after critters before, rats and voles and the like, for somewhere in his ancestry flowed the blood of a true hunting terrier. But when he pinned a rabbit or squirrel, he went no further, just looking at the terrified, writhing creature under him till it nipped at his paws, and he yelped and released it to go scurrying away, cursing in squeaks. She would watch dinner escape, squeezing her empty belly but happy she didn’t have to hurt an animal and cook it up.

He was amazingly strong, despite his small stature and a diet of scraps. Amazingly gentle, but without an ounce of timidity. He didn’t vy for dominance, nor bully her for her food, yet she felt he was her equal in a profound way, her partner.

He was a manly little pup, yet a little diva who wagged his bum wherever he went and took up an undue amount of space whenever he cuddled up in her sleeping bag or huddled in her lap. He was wise as a serpent and stupid as a dove. She believed he was full of ancient wisdom and occult knowledge, an old soul, but he denied this with his silent stare. He would turn away, slinging a rope of slobber, keeping his secrets.

But sometimes, she swore the black-purple jowls of his brachycephalic face were grinning at her knowingly. A grin that promised everything would be okay. And it was that dumb smile and unspoken promise that got her though the marching, scouring days and the hidden, frigid nights.

*He really is a special dog,* she thought absentmindedly as she held him back by his thick turkey-thigh legs and listened, watching his special ear turn minutely, scanning for information. “You’re just imagining things,” she whispered to him, trying to convince herself as well.

Then she heard a crunch of leaves and her heart stood still. She suddenly became as cold as the air around her, like all her clothes had disappeared and she was doused in the mid-spring chill.

A few more crunches in a steady beat, coming closer. Then one heavier one.

Cudo started grumbling deeply, rolling into a low, quiet growl. This was his worst habit, one that had gotten them nearly spotted a dozen times before, forcing them to flee. She tried to muzzle him with her hand, but he resisted vigorously, making more noise with his snorting and snarling than he had growling.

If they’d have to run, she might as well see who they were running from.

Slowly, she rose up, holding onto the dog’s green-blue collar.

Ahead of them in a clearing, a young man with a mop of blond, curly hair was sitting alone, hunched over a notebook he was scribbling in.

As she rose to get a better view, she thoughtlessly pulled Cudo’s collar tighter, which he took as a cue to let out a deep, distinguished *ROOF.*

Cat froze again, paralyzed by fear.

The boy slowly turned his head until he was staring back at her. Their eyes locked for what seemed like forever. His eyes were like sharp diamonds, piercing her from twenty five feet away, but they were soulful and gentle, sad and hopeful, young and timeless. They reminded her of Cudo, an old soul. He seemed to hear this thought and growl-roofed jealously.

“Hello,” the young man simply said, and turned back to his book.

She knew her best chance at a safe getaway was to run, quickly and without stopping. The older kids at the juvenile camp had taught her that the hard way, of course. Yet she stood there, knees bent and buckling, cursing herself for freezing up the way she swore she'd never do again. Something about this boy told her she didn't have to run, in fact, quite the opposite. There was a gravity about him that nearly drew her in toward this elven character in the midst of the forest.

Slowly, reluctantly, she clipped Cudo’s tiny four-foot rope leash back into his collar,, all the while keeping eyes locked on the boy. She found herself inching closer to him, stepping between the leaves where she could, as if the boy didn’t already know she was there. Cudo went rigid and stubbornly resisted her pulling him along. “*This is a bad idea,”* she thought she heard Cudo say. “*I don’t like this guy.*”

Suddenly she was right beside the boy in the middle of the forest floor, and she couldn’t help but feel she was in a dream. More likely, she was about to die. He would transform into a monster and snatch her up, leaving Cudo to flee in terror with his leash trailing behind. Or a gang of looters would pounce on her, laughing evilly that the silly girl had fallen for their trap. They would hang her upside down by her ankles, wail on her with rocks and sticks like the camp kids did, then skin and eat her while she watched.

“Hello,” she finally whispered back.

“Hi,” the boy said. “This is Jerry. Who are you?”

Cat looked around for Jerry, and quickly realized he meant himself. “You’re Jerry?”

The boy nodded.

Her lips tightened and Cudo rumbled. *What do I do now?*

“I’m... My name is Caterina Bella Milano. This is my dog, Cudo. He’s half Olde English Bull Dog and a quarter Pug and a quarter something else like Boxer maybe,” she stammered out with all her will. She talked to Cudo all the time, but talking to humans... she had nearly forgotten how.

“Ah, Caterina Bella Milano and your dog Cudo, Jerry is pleased to meet you,” he said politely, flashing her a glance from his book and nodding quickly toward Cudo, who rudely disregarded him

She waited a while in the awkward silence to summon the nerve to speak again. “Why do you talk like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like that.”

Jerry looked up to the sky for a moment. The sun seemed to get a little brighter as he did. “Why do you talk like that?” he replied.

Cat was stumped. She began to wonder what she talked like and why she talked like it. She never thought she talked like anything, in fact. *Stupid...* she started beating herself up in her head about nothing in particular.

“Jerry likes dogs and cats,” Jerry said casually after another long pause.

“Oh. Well I guess we are a dog and a cat, because you can call me Cat. That’s what people call me.”

“It is a nice name.”

“My middle name means ‘beautiful,’” she said absentmindedly.

“This is a nice name, too.”

“Does Jerry mean anything?”

Jerry pondered for a moment. “Jerry means many things.”

She stood there, looking over him and leaning on one leg, trying to restrain Cudo from being mean to Jerry, (not that he would actually attack him, she thought,) trying to understand what Jerry meant.

“What’s that you’re writing in your book?” she asked, craning her head to get a glimpse

“A story,” Jerry answered before tilting his notebook back toward himself. Cat glanced away quickly and tried to ignore the warmth creeping up her cheeks

“What’s it about?”

“It is a story about Jerry. But also about everything.”

“I like stories,” she said, trying to sneak a glance at it again, more subtly this time

Jerry closed the book this time, tucked it in his jacket pocket, and gently turned around on his butt. “Jerry likes stories too,” he said, redirecting her attention. Would you tell him one?”

Cat hummed, looking for one in her head. It suddenly seemed to be empty of stories, at least any that weren’t sad. She didn’t want to make him sad.

“One time I washed my underwear in a stream and hung them out to dry,” she began.“Cudo saw it and thought it was food and ate it while I wasn’t looking. I knew he did because it wasn’t there when I came back. I was so worried it was gonna get stuck in his tummy. Wanna know what happened?”

Jerry nodded.

“He pooped it all out in one piece!” She flashed her hands, bright-eyed and gasping for effect.

Jerry stared blankly at her, and she felt foolish. Then suddenly, he smirked. Then he started laughing. It was an awkward, gentle laugh, a *hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm!* like she had never heard, but she liked it because *she* had made him laugh,and she thought his laugh and smile were cute.

“Jerry likes Cudo,” Jerry mused, looking at the funny dog fondly. Cudo stared back at him, refusing to react. “...even if he does not like Jerry. How did you name him?”

“Oh... I didn’t... A teacher at the camp did. Or at least I thought he did. When the virus got bad, a lot of the adults started leaving. They said they were gonna be back, but we knew they weren’t, because the ones that left never came back. They usually said they had to get back to their families. One named Mr. Wells, he was my favorite. He said he had to go home for a while because his wife got sick, but he would come back. And other new teachers would be there soon to watch us. I believed him when he said he’d come back because he never lied to me.”

“Good. It is not a good thing to lie.”

“Right.” Cat wanted to roll her eyes, but it wasn’t a good thing to be rude, either. “Anyway, there was a puppy one of the other kids in the camp had, but the girl...the girl died. She was nice, but the other kids weren’t being nice to her puppy after she died. They just messed with him and threw him around and taped stuff to him like a sign that said ‘Free dog.’ So Mr. Wells took care of him, but he said he had to go, so he asked me if I would take care of it just until he got back. ‘Of course,’ I said. He made me promise. I said yes, duh! So he handed me the puppy and said ‘kudos.’”

“Kudos?”

“Yeah. The other kids told me that wasn’t his real name because he was too stupid and ugly to have a real name. And they gave him a bunch of nasty names, but I didn’t care. I liked it, the name. Cudo. It reminds me of cuddles.”

Jerry nodded in applause. “Jerry thinks that is a fine story.”

“Thanks. Do you think I can read your story?” Cat ventured. Third time’s the charm?

Jerry bit his lip lightly. “Maybe someday you can read Jerry’s story. For now, it’s not finished yet.”

“When do you think you’ll finish it?”

“When the time is right,” he said with a tone of finality that told her the conversation was over.

Cat hummed at the odd boy, looking for her next words. Cudo was still humming angrily at him too, when suddenly there was a shout far off.

Cat started to run out of the clearing, back to her hiding spot.. She stopped in a row of evergreen trees and looked back at Jerry.

“Are you leaving?” he asked her.

“I gotta go. I’m sorry. It was nice meeting you. Goodbye!” she said frantically, and undid Cudo’s leash.He ran right beside her as they disappeared into the woods.

Jerry stared at where she once stood, then pulled the book out of his pocket. It bore his first name written in smooth cursive on the front. Under it, he penned a last name. “Jerry Pinehalst,” it read now.

He nodded affirmatively at it.

The voices came nearer. “Jerry! Hey, where are you?”

“Jerry is over here,” he answered.

“Ah, there you are.” Another young man his age emerged into the clearing, carrying a black pump shotgun. “What’re you doing?”

“Sitting.”

“Right. Well, we just scored some food, and get this, Kimmy found a gun! With ammo for it!”

Jerry nodded, barely hearing him.

“Hey, I know you don’t like weapons or whatever, but that’s good news. We need every bit of edge we can get out here.”

Jerry just stared ahead silently.

“Hey, you okay? Something happen?”

Jerry turned his head. “Jerry is hungry. Jerry can have some of your food?”

“Of course, man. Kimmy’s heating up a can or two right now. Let’s go.”

Jerry slowly got to his feet and followed his friend away. Before he left the clearing, he looked back to where the girl and her dog stood just a minute earlier.

He tucked the notebook into his pocket and smiled gently.

### 3 - The things spring brings

Lyle marked an X on the calendar with a bold red permanent marker, beside a bunch of black X’s. His hand shook as he did it. It was always shaking now, making it hard to write. He wondered whether it was frayed nerves or malnutrition kicking in. *Guess I can’t do much about it either way.*

May 5th. Cinco de Mayo. It didn’t feel like a holiday.

*Where did the black pen go?* he wondered, sniffing the dirty chemical fumes of the red one and stuffing it in his pocket.

It prickled him that all his spare thoughts seemed like that lately: forgetting something inane, calculating the remaining supplies and how long he had left before starving or running out of cooking fuel, how cold it would be, what maintenance he had to neglect: doors and window frames leaking cold air, mice getting uppity— the fight against a slow and gradual decay.

It all piled on and fell over itself like a stack of tomes.

He suddenly decided he wouldn’t do any of it, that it should be his own personal holiday, even if it were a holiday dedicated to doing nothing.

He wrapped himself in his thick wool blanket and mosied outside. It seemed to be the first day of the year that it was warmer outdoors than in. He was happy to get outside. The house was full of ghosts driving him crazy, or at least into a depressed catatonia interspersed only with anxious moments when cold or hunger forced his soulless body into action.

He sat on the front steps of the porch with his dad’s Steyr AUG bullpup rifle hidden beneath the blanket, breathing in the cool air and imagining cars driving occasionally down the street of his waterside neighborhood nestled away in sparse woods.

It probably wasn’t safe out here, where the new season was just waking the world up, but the warmth of the sun on his head was too alluring to ignore. He opened the blanket to let the glow thaw his skin. It was brisk, the winds always high by the water, but this cold was different. Where winter gusts of wind threatened to freeze one still, the cool spring breeze woke one up, nudging your chin up to the basking treetops where blue skies brought the world alive.

Lyle’s eyes scanned his neighbor’s homes. Windows were broken out, and the long-abandoned exteriors were in need of a good power washing. Old leaves caked in the neglected front yards where manicured green grass once grew. There wasn’t a single car parked in the driveways of those once-nice places that would normally already be filled with out-of-staters from New York and New Jersey and Massachusetts and Connecticut about this time of year. He wondered idly if there were still *Pokemon Go* creatures scattered over the ghost world, if a secret server somewhere kept overgrown *Farmville* farms alive for middle-aged housewives who would never return to them.

Where were the boomer pensioners who would happily pass out cold treats to him and the other neighborhood kids on hot summer days, but later yell at them for tearing up the yard playing football? Where was Mr. Sanders, the retired teacher who taught him that everything was power and money, and the winners wrote history? Where was Mrs. Whatever, who ceaselessly complained of the lazy younger generations but patted Lyle on the head when he shoveled the snow out of her driveway without being asked, and always gave his happy ten year old self an extra fiver with a wink?

What would they think if they could see him now, huddled in a blanket in May and looking out on what used to be their homes— the empty graves of generations cut short. Oh, boomers and X-ers! Oh, those empty streets!

How he missed smarmy old folks, spotty cell coverage, running water, takeout, and the endless *whoosh* of cars coming and going, trailing with them the acrid smell of sweet fossil fuel emissions! He listened to the wind in the trees and could have sworn he almost heard one.

He tried to shake the thought loose, more sure than ever that he was really losing it now, but the sound grew *louder,* until it finally materialized in the form of an old car rumbling down the road.

Lyle jumped up, blood suddenly pumping hot. *Run and hide, or confront?* For two years, everything had been the former—stay inside, wear your masks, keep away from other people, wait till everything is safe again. Lyle had done his waiting, but “safe again” never happened, and boredom and loneliness make people do strange things.

He decidedly pulled up his hunting camo gaiter mask and quickly formed a sort of blanket tent, poking the black barrel of his rifle out, carefully watching the vehicle as it drew closer. A sudden thought nearly distracted him, shook him to his core. By standing his ground, he realized he was committing to kill again. His mouth went dry.

“Hey! Stop!” he shouted.

The car coasted to a halt in front of his house.

“Get out!” Lyle yelled, more confidently this time. “Let me see you!”

When there was no answer, he grew enraged and marched toward the old beige 93 Buick Century with his integral Swarovski 1.5x optic trained on the driver’s window. The door creaked open.

“Hey! Don’t shoot!” a pathetic, panicked voice pleaded. Lyle softened a bit. He knew too well what hunger and desperation sounded like. Still, he kept his weapon stiffly pointed at the car.

A shaggy head of hair emerged, framed by two hands raised beside it like moose antlers. It ducked down for a moment as the stranger stepped out of his car, before emerging upright and fully visible in the scope’s circular crosshairs. Lyle's jaw nearly dropped when he recognized the lanky boy standing before him.

“Jace?” Lyle called out unsurely.

“Who? Lyle? Is that you!?” the voice replied incredulously.

The kid walked forward but Lyle jerked his gun, “Stay there!” and they both froze. Lyle tried to clear his throat. “Are you armed?”

“No man, I was driving around looking for food. I thought I’d drive by your place but I never thought you’d be here. Honestly, I was thinking about looking for your Pokemon cards.”

“They’re still up there,” Lyle said. Suddenly sure of the stranger’s identity, he felt wrong pointing a gun at his old friend and lowered the muzzle. “How did you get a car?”

“It was my nanna’s, remember?” Jace replied, lowering his arms slowly and taking a few more steps forward.

Lyle supposed he might have remembered that. “Where did you get gas?”

“I found it in our garage when I was looking for a pipe to unclog the chimney. Winter was...really rough.” Jace’s voice caught on the last word and he shook his head. “I never got it unclogged... Did your parents catch it? The Omega Variant?”

Lyle gulped down nothing and nodded. “Your mom and nanna too?”

Jace’s eyes nearly welled up and quickly he looked away. “Where did you get guns?”

“My dad was a target shooter, remember?”

“Jeez, I bet you got a whole arsenal in there.” Jace grinned almost sinisterly.

Lyle sighed angrily. Thinking about his dad’s former arsenal and how it was now gone pissed him off. “No, just what he kept here. Most of his collection was in his locker at the range. It's all looted by now.”

“Maybe we should check.” Jace offered.

“It’s gone, Jace!” Lyle snapped. “Just like our parents and everyone and everything.”

“Alright, alright…” Jace raised his hands in mock-surrender. “Listen man, do you have any food or water? It’s been a whole day since I had anything...”

Lyle looked at Jace, mollified by sympathy toward his hungry friend, and turned back to the house. “Come in.”

### 4 - Out of the house

Lyle handed Jace a pot of cool water and a cotton blanket. He sat back on Lyle’s musty beige couch with torn and faded blue jeans and a beat-up black winter coat. This Jace looked different than Lyle remembered, though his hooked nose still stuck out, giving him a curious, birdlike appearance, friendly and confused at the same time.

His bright hazel eyes of mottled green and amber caught every bit of sunlight and radiated it back out to the world, seemingly even in places where there was no light. This and the constant naive smile he wore betrayed his gentle, childlike nature.

Jace was a young man who didn’t know what he wanted and didn’t know how to get it. This was the same Jace who stepped on every crack in the sidewalk as a kid, but became horrified and guilty when his mother’s back broke, nevermind the long hours she worked as a nurse. The realization that he could cause so much damage to a loved one made him set out to never step on a crack again, so he stepped on more cracks than ever by accident. His mother’s back never got better.

He woke most mornings with an image of a girl he had met or invented in his dreams and fell in love with her immediately, without diminishing the deep love he had for every other girl he had ever met. He had four girlfriends between elementary and highschool, all of whom inevitably left him for someone much less loving and sweet, which only made his pangs of yearning for them that much worse.

His dirty blond hair was grown out to his shoulders, his sharp face colonized by a reddish scraggly beard and scissor-cut bangs hanging over his brow. It was enough to make Lyle offer him a disposable razor. “Here. We stockpiled enough of these to shave the whole world’s balls for years. I’ll warm up some water for you when the tuna and beans are done.”

“Sounds great, man.”

“I put a lot of pepper in. It’s the only way I can stomach any of this crap anymore. That okay?”

“Anything, man.” Jace rubbed his hands together hungrily. “I really appreciate it.”

The room grew silent except for the sizzling saucepan.

“Imagine all the weird shit we did as kids, but we’d never imagine all of this, huh?” Lyle mused. He brought over the sweet slop and dumped most of it in Jace’s empty bowl. He dug in while Lyle nibbled at it slowly, watchful, curious.

“Remember the hamsteak we made in the woods? Over the campfire?” Jace asked, slobbering with food in his mouth. “Took it from your mom’s fridge.”

“Best thing ever. Before someone chainsawed the tree down and ruined the fort.”

“Yeah, that sucked. But I guess we didn’t build it anyway.”

“True, but how much can you really own a fort in the woods? Throw up some walkways in the trees, a hammock, a campfire, call it yours... man, that big rope hammock... I miss it.”

“I’d kill for a hammock right now.” Jace’s mind floated through the ceiling. “I wonder where the nearest pig is right now. I’d totally eat that pig. You think there’s any pigs left alive? They can’t be doing worse than we are.”

“You couldn’t cut up a fish if it threw itself on a grill for you,” Lyle almost laughed. He remembered how Jace always had the zaniest ideas, how his craziness rubbed off on everyone around him. Eventually they grew apart. In a tiny US state’s southernmost county, moving two towns over was sometimes enough to do that when you were young. But seeing Jace now seemed like the happiest thing. Maybe today would be a holiday after all.

“You got any fish on this pond?” his friend asked.

“Hell if I know. I think they go south for the winter. Maybe they’re out there now. Pickerels and smallmouth bass and crappies. Don’t know if I’d eat em.”

“I would!” Jace exclaimed, ignoring his aforementioned lack of fish butchering capabilities. “And I wanna go south too. That was my plan. I can’t spend another winter up here. Imagine somewhere warm all the time. Crops and fish year round, no snow.”

“That’s probably what everyone else thought six months ago. They probably found a whole lot of people shooting at them.” Lyle fidgeted with his rifle uncomfortably. “...Hang onto what’s theirs.”

“I got shot at this morning! There’s not a lot of friendly people anywhere!”

“Someone *shot* at you? Why did you stop when I pointed a gun at your car?”

“They shot through the back doors. I didn’t want to get hit next time I got shot at.”

“That doesn’t mean to stop for every random maniac that shouts you down.” Lyle grit his teeth.

“If I didn't stop, I wouldn’t have found you.”

*And I might have killed you.* Lyle choked back the thought.

“Hey, why don’t you go with me?” Jace suggested. “We can get out of here together, find a farm or anything better than this. I don’t know what we’ll find, but at least we’ll have each other’s backs.”

“I don’t know, there’s...” Lyle looked toward the yard through the backdoor sliders where the dead lie buried and realized there was no longer an excuse not to do something. The whole world was full of terrifying and wonderful things, whatever they were. They wouldn’t get anywhere by staying here and dying alone. “I guess we could try.”

Jace gleamed. “It’ll be a road trip! We always wanted to take one.”

Lyle supposed they had mentioned traveling as kids.

“You were always talking about seeing your family in the Carolinas,” Jace said enthusiastically, then caught himself and looked down. “We don’t really know if it got *all* the older people. Some news said 30s and up, some said 40s, some in between... Maybe your aunts and uncles and cousins are still down there. Teela, little Devon?”

“Maybe.” Lyle doubted it.

“And think of all the fields and forests and open space! Don’t worry about the car, it’s old but hella reliable. My nanna had it for years. It's a real workhorse.”

Lyle looked off in the distance and thought hard. “We’ll have to gather up supplies. I didn’t plan on leaving, so they’re spread all over the house. We’ll need everything we can fit, but we can’t overpack the car either. We'll pile everything up on this table and sort it.”

Jace clapped, “Definitely!”

He sprung up and tagged behind Lyle as they searched the house, meticulously scanning every nook and cranny for canned food, jugs for boiled water, lighters and matches, medicine and bandages, clothing, ammunition, dishes, tools, camping gear, cigarettes, shoes, glasses, anything of possible use.

Jace followed behind him, babbling about unthinkable conspiracies and insane news stories that flooded the web before the internet shut off a year ago. As he talked, Jace would pack up something that *seemed* useful. When Lyle picked up a set of compact saucepans that stacked neatly within one another, Jace picked up a massive, unwieldy Chinese wok. When Lyle raided the medicine cabinet, Jace grabbed the menstrual relief pills and tampons, somehow imagining they’d be important.

Lyle sighed. He suggested Jace take some initiative and go search on his own. Jace did, shouting with glee when he found something particularly useless. Lyle didn't like him poking around the house, but he hoped two sets of hands and eyes would be better than one.

They gradually covered the metal-framed glass coffee table supplies, sorting them a little more with each addition. Lyle sorted things one way and Jace another. Eventually there was more sorting going on than than adding.

To overcome this organizational conflict, Lyle sorted the bulk of the canned goods into bins and backpacks. Even Jace would have the sense and civility not to mess with a finished, compartmentalized bag ready to go. He spent a few minutes organizing cans in a way that would produce a meal with sweet molasses baked beans twice a week, on every Saturday and Wednesday. A perfect setup, with access to everything. But when he came back to the table, he was shocked to find it bare.

He sprinted out to the car. Jace was standing proudly over the open car trunk.

Lyle’s heart sank. “You brought it all out already?”

“All perfect, see?”

It was anything but perfect. The giant soup pot sat beside the smaller pots not even nested within one another. Necessities like sunscreen and water and undergarments were buried underneath a mound of out-of-season clothes. Everything might as well have been put in backwards, because at least there would have been a discernible logic to it.

It was a nightmare that would take a long time to rectify while on the road, but Lyle didn’t have the heart or patience to fix it. “Well,” Lyle took a long, deep breath. “If that’s everything from the table, that’s everything we need.” He peeked into the back seats and found them packed tightly with badly arranged junk. He ran his fingers over the bullet holes in the back left door and sighed again.

“You sure, man? Nothing else you want?” Jace asked.

Lyle pulled out a stack of family photos and paused on one of his parents, with him as a child sitting between them. He shuffled through them and handed Jace a trading card.

“Your first edition Charizard? I can’t, man.” Jace pushed it away like it was a million dollar bill.

“Take it, I don’t want it anymore. That’s a serious protective sleeve, so it won’t bend even though it’s by itself.” Lyle put the photos in his wallet that he’d emptied of everything unimportant. The dead man’s ID was still in there.

“What about the rest of your cards? Your whole collection?”

“Don’t have the space, don’t need ‘em. What’re Pokemon cards worth here at the end of the world? Food, water, shelter.... that’s all that’s gonna matter.”

“And guns?” Jace smiled, placing the holofoil card in his pocket after giving it one more thorough lookover.

“Guns don’t hurt. Nice to be able to shoot back.” Lyle slapped the bullet holes on the side of the car, then tossed Jace a rifle and a jingling pouch of ammo. “.22. It’s not very powerful, but good for supporting fire, and it’ll kill if you land a good hit. There’s earplugs in the bag. Stuff 'em in your ears anytime you think you’re gonna have to shoot. It’ll keep you from going deaf.”

“I don’t wanna hurt anyone. You don’t have to give me a gun, man.”

“I don’t want you defenseless and screwed if we run into trouble. Besides, it’s the only other gun lying around besides these boys.” Lyle turned the AUG slung around him and slapped the 1911 pistol in his belt. “I can’t carry them all. Just don’t blow my head off by accident. That’d be an embarrassing way to go.”

“You got it, man. Thanks.” His eyes looked over the gun unsurely, then his thoughts shifted in a second. “We’re really doing this!” The freedom Jace felt almost poured out of him.

“Yep.” Lyle pinched his old friend’s shoulder playfully. “You driving?”

“You maybe want to?” He scratched his head. “I’m not very good.”

“Dude, you’re my age.”

“A year younger, remember? Eighteen. And my mom always had the car at the hospital, so I couldn’t drive it much to practice. Plus everything was closed down for nonessential stuff.”

“I remember. Fine, let’s hit the road,” Lyle shrugged.

“You don’t need your blanket?”

Lyle looked to the front steps of his parent’s house, where the blanket lay in a pile like a shed skin. “It’s spring and we’re headed south. Doubt I’ll need it.”

### 5 - Driving about

“Do you always drive like that?” Jace asked.

Lyle’s dominant hand fell from the top of the wheel to the sides.

“Like what?”

“With your hand on top of the wheel.”

Lyle put his hand back. “I don’t know. Maybe. I think it’s how they teach you to drive in driving school. Or they tell you not to do it that way, I forget.”

“I’m not criticizing, man. I’d just like to hold the wheel right when I start driving more. You look good holding the wheel that way. Stylish. Cool.”

“How did you hold it when you were driving before?” Suddenly Lyle’s fingers were tapping anxiously on their precarious place on top of the steering wheel where they’d always been.

“Kind of like...” And Jace put his hands on an imaginary steering wheel in all the positions he could think of. The responsible and reliable 9 & 3 o’clock, hands on either side. The 8 & 4, relaxing on the bottom half of the wheel. Then he hunched forward for the 10 & 2, a grip for a man in need of serious control, a man perhaps running from something. The thought disturbed Jace. They weren’t running from anyone, but *to* somewhere. Somewhere great.

“I don’t know,” Jace said, sitting back in his seat and resting his head on his hand, looking out the window woefully. “It looks like I’ve got a ways to go.”

“You’ll get it eventually,” Lyle reassured. “All it takes is practice.”

The car ground to a halt, the engine sputtering and spitting. There was silence for what seemed like minutes. Lyle’s brain shuffled thoughts so fast that his eyes darted left and right. Jace looked around, aware there was a problem and waiting for it to fix itself.

“Jace, what kind of gas did you say you put in here?”

“Hmm. Huh. Never heard it do this before. Nan took great care of it.” Jace stopped cleaning his nails and got out the Buick original owner’s manual buried in years of paperwork. He knew his nanna had kept all the papers because she was good like that. She was as meticulous and virtuous a woman as any.

“Did you put lawnmower gas in the car or something?”

“I don’t know. It was in a red tank,” Jace said.

“Was it near a lawnmower?” Lyle asked, grinding his teeth.

“It’s a garage, with a yard just outside. Of course there was a lawnmower around somewhere. But no, mom would have me roll our lawn mower over to her house since it was just two blocks away. What’s the difference?”

Lyle blinked at him for a few seconds, then grabbed the stack of papers and started sorting through over fifteen years of regular maintenance at the same two or three shops. The water pump, fuel pump, exhaust and brake lines, pads and rotors had been replaced. These were relatively minor repairs. It had seen more air filters, oil filters, and oil changes than the average sports car. It had to have earned those local mechanics quite the living until they died too. Unquestionably, the car was well cared for. Iit seemed impossible for it to be breaking down right now.

“How long was it sitting?”

“I don’t know, there was no gas to mow the lawn. We were kind of preoccupied. You know, with the pandemic?”

“The car, man. The car.”

“Oh. Well, Nanna died from cancer just a few months before Corona came around, unless you count November 19 when the globalists knew... So maybe two or three years?”

“And that doesn’t seem like a problem to you?” Lyle asked, his voice straining.

“Obviously. Trump and China not only knew about it. They *helped create it! Together!*”

Lyle pounded his head off the steering wheel and the car horn honked long and loud. It was a good, solid, deep sound. Big sound. An American sound. They didn’t make horns like that anymore.

### 6 - Standing time

It was getting late and becoming more and more a good time to go. In fact, there was no better time to go than about four hours ago, when the car had stopped. Even the car would agree if it were asked.

Lyle was standing over the engine, fiddling with it periodically with stiff, cold hands, trying to think the vehicle into working. He had a basic idea of how vehicles functioned, but inside there were about twenty times more enigmatic parts, tubes, wires and devices, than he knew what to do with.

Jace had been stepping in and out of the vehicle to stand over Lyle’s shoulders and assure him that the car was in tiptop shape anytime that was in question. He would then go back in the car and try to pass the time until the car decided to remember that it was supposed to be functioning perfectly right now, and that it was better for everyone if it did so.

Jace was ready to forgive the Buick for this oversight, and he hoped Lyle was too. After all, it was getting late, which meant it was getting cold and dark quickly. They could catch a chill. Or be ambushed and killed.

Lyle kept complaining loudly, going in and out of the car, cursing and swearing and kicking the rusty spots, rattling the whole frame.

“That’s it,” Lyle slammed the door as he planted his ass back in the car. “It’s done, it’s not moving.”

“Give her a while. You don’t know what this car’s capable of. It’s reliable to the core. We’re sitting in quality Detroit steel. Steel that stands the test of time.”

“*We’re* not going to stand the test of time! It’s probably not even 6 o’clock and I’m shivering! Do you know how cold it’s going to get over the next twelve hours?”

“We could start a fire.”

“A fire? What, in the car? Fire in the open would draw people. You know, people that wanna kill us and take our shit?” Lyle slammed the steering wheel and it shook momentarily like a spring. He was happy he didn’t hit the horn again by accident.

“Then maybe, like, a vented barrel fire?”

“How did you even survive the winter, Jace? Or the winter before that? How did you not die cold and shivering and alone?” Lyle startled at his own words. He always had a way of taking it a step too far when he didn’t mean to. But Jace didn’t seem to notice.

His friend rubbed his lips with his fingers thoughtlessly, then removed them thoughtfully, remembering it was bad taste to touch your eyes or mouth or not wear a mask around others, even though both of them had barely left their homes for two winters.

“Wood stove.”

“Wood stove?”

“Yeah, the wood stove at my parent’s house. But then that got clogged up because I was putting so much different stuff in it to stay warm, so I went to stay at my nanna’s. You’d be surprised how fast all the wood in walking distance from your house goes whenever it’s all you have to burn. After that, it was down to whatever I could find. You know, plastic burns really well, very hot. Very efficient. But it smells terrible.”

“That’s why you’re never supposed to burn it, man. It ruins the stove and chimney and it’s bad for the environment, too. What would the EPA think?”

“I suppose they’d be proud of my ingenuity and responsibility. It takes a certain kind of man to be able to weigh the environment versus the unquenchable need to survive.”

Lyle knew Jace was getting into one of those fantastical nonsense-babbling moods again, except he had no idea of knowing what was what, so Lyle just played along, spouting whatever he could remember seeing on the net before it shut down.

“I’m not joking, man!” Lyle shouted. “You know they were running environmental death squads just a year ago. Think about that. Think if they found out!”

“That doesn’t sound right. Are you sure it wasn’t the Department of Environmental Management? State agencies usually handle that sort of shit, I thought.”

“I don’t know. Anyway, when shit got really bad, not only were maniacs like you burning barrels of plastic just to survive, but they were mass dumping everywhere. Corporations and even small businesses knew they could take advantage of the chaos. There were chimney sweeps dumping soot into national parks and school playgrounds, grease fires that evaporated entire lakes, and tactical commando squadrons dumping radioactive waste. There were small wars breaking out just to protect their dumping territories. They even used dirty bombs when things got desperate, I heard.”

“I wish I’d known about the soot dumping thing. We had to put our chimney soot under the garden, and it killed all the plants. Man, those veggies would have been good to eat,” Jace lamented.

Lyle kept on babbling, because he welcomed the distraction. “I heard Lake Erie is a flaming desert now, and these EPA soldiers are literally radioactive. Do you understand how dangerous that is for everyone?”

A light bulb lit above Jace’s head. “Their weapons and ammo could be contaminated with radioactivity.”

“Exactly. If they’re not just using depleted uranium ammo already. Rules of war, Geneva Convention? That’s all gone. They were reporting it on the news. The real news. Before the fake news became real news. The worst thing is that the EPA death squads started dumping waste themselves, bigtime. Got a monopoly on it. They incorporated the local agencies and forced them to get with the program. They kidnapped and deputized every marine biologist, ecologist, trail marker, fisherman, climate change activist, climate change denier, all-organic composter or flat earther they could get their hands on. All those unemployed types.”

“I believe it! Stuff like that was all over the internet right up until they shut it down.”

“Exactly. They worked really hard to keep the internet up as long as possible, to prevent the spread of unofficial information. It would have worked, but the unofficial information became so popular that it crowded out the official information, remember? But what most people didn’t realize is that most of the unofficial information was official information to begin with.”

“What made it ‘official’?”

“No one can really agree on that.”

“Was it determined by some scale of, you know, objective accuracy? You know.”

“No one can come to an agreement on that either,” Lyle said regretfully. “So what happened after your parent’s fireplace clogged up?”

“Which-what now?”

“Your parent’s fireplace, that you depended on for heat and life.”

“Oh, right, that. I was confused because you called it a fireplace, but it was a wood stove, and wood stoves are very different from fireplaces. Fireplaces are practically just a hole in the wall made of brick that vents through a chimney. Wood stoves are much more complex. They use a series of tubes that take in an adjustable, controlled flow of air so that the burn is much more efficient. Less waste, less deposited tar, creosote, soot...”

“...melted plastic...”

“Exactly. You get more out of it.”

“You never fully explained, why did you have to go to your nanna’s? You clogged the chimney?”

“Oh. Well, eventually. I wanted to stay at my parent’s so I wasn’t far from them, even if they were... you know. So I figured a barrel fire that vented out the wall was as good as a chimney, maybe even better because it wasn’t clogged yet and it was closer to the center of the room. So it took me a long time to bend metal, drill the right holes, get the right air intake through the barrel’s lid, get it venting to the outside through a hole I cut in the wall... it really made me think about the ingenuity it takes to design a good wood stove, or even a good, safe indoor barrel fire. It warms me up just thinking about it!”

“So why did you have to leave if it turned out so good?”

“Because it burnt the house down.”

“It what? You burnt your parent’s house down?”

“Right down to the foundations, damn it. I watched from the woods. There was so much smoke that people came to loot. I was worried they were from the EPA, so I got out of there.”

“To your grandma’s?”

“You got it.”

“...And your parents were already...?”

“Burnt up in the chest freezer in the basement, yeah.”

“Jesus Christ, Jace! You put their bodies in a freezer?”

“I know!” He looked like he wanted to cry. “I wanted to bury them, but the ground was so hard, and it was so cold, and I was so sad and tired all the time. And you know, I was going to, but once they got in there, they froze and got stuck in there, so I figured...”

“You figured you’d just let the whole house burn down on top of them?!”

“Hey man...”

Lyle slapped his forehead exasperatedly. “I’m sorry.”

Jace sighed.

“It wasn’t my place to say anything.”

“No man, it’s okay. You’re right. I was just going crazy, you know? Being cooped up for two years... then they got sick... I must still be crazy now. I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, J. At least not any crazier than anyone else who’s still alive. All this shit would drive anyone crazy.”

Jace looked up with almost a spark of hope in his eye. “Are you crazy?”

Lyle looked away and sucked in nothing from his dry mouth.

A gunshot sounded from a house nearby and a back passenger window shattered. They jumped and fumbled in their seats, filled with that awful dazing heat that comes instantly in moments of sudden danger. Another window exploded and Jace screamed like a girl. Lyle tried to scream, but his throat was dry.

They slammed their seats back almost in unison and cowered to the floor, shaking and twitching and jerking, screaming for God and their moms and praying it wasn’t the EPA firing on them. A bullet hit the metal of the door with a loud clunk and they screamed and screamed some more.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Jace shouted.

“We’ve got to get out of here!”

“We’ll shoot us— I mean *they’ll* shoot us!”

“Come on! Out my door!” Lyle tugged him toward the driver’s side, away from where the bullets were hitting, though it was hard to tell. Every few seconds, a shot or two zipped into the car. Windows popped and glass littered the interior. Lyle flung his door open and they stumbled out onto the road.

Imminent death was in them and all around them. It was bullets in the air, supersonic and invisible, carrying that promise of sudden demise, that unavoidable-but-please-God-not-today encounter with the unstomachable cosmic uncertainty of a million possible thereafters— visions of fearful divine judgment, impossible heavens, unspeakable hells, or the cold and final black of nothingness. It shot by them like thunder cracks, and they dodged the lightning as they sprinted with bodies heavier than stone, hands squeezed together like terrified children.

“Please God not today!” one of them shouted at the calamity.

And like that, they were fleeing through brush and trees, deaf and suddenly lighter, able to feel the sweat and the cool air. Lyle thought he was in the Elysian Fields, though he couldn’t remember that name or any other words. And though he didn't know what the *champs-Elysées* were supposed to look like, he remembered that they didn't look like this darkening forest, so he knew he was still alive.

“We... made it...!” Jace echoed between breaths, as if their minds were one for that moment.

But they didn’t stop running until they collapsed in a small clearing that would make them feel very much in the open if they were thinking straight, and if they weren’t sure they had just run a hundred miles in just a few minutes.

“That... was...”

“Holy... shit...” Lyle breathed.

“I can’t... believe...”

“I know...” Lyle swallowed a gallon of air and fell back on the dirt, looking up at the sky that seemed oddly purple, and somehow reminiscent of dark blood and skulls. “Now we’re screwed.”

Jace waited a whole long minute to catch his breath. “Horrible... that car was in mint condition. Beside the rot underneath. And whatever little glitch made the engine stop. And the cracking leather on the one seat Nan drove in. It was a family heirloom, man!”

“Why are you worried about the car, you idiot!? What about our stuff? That was weeks and months of supplies! Now we have nothing!”

“What you got is trouble!” a guy about their age said, stepping out of the woods with a shotgun pointed at them. He was a tall, pale, nervous-looking young man with a clean face hidden by a dirty Thin Blue Line gaiter, nicely-cropped brown hair, sharp eyebrows and dark eyes. His Mossy Oak cargo pants were worn and faded with many small rips and his long sleeve cotton thermal hung off him like he’d lost a lot of weight, or it had once belonged to someone much larger. His eyes looked strained, though you couldn’t tell if it was nervousness or cockiness.

Lyle struggled to his feet, hoping it would be easier to deploy his sidearm from a standing position, and remembering that he was shaking too much to deploy anything usefully.

“You sound stupid, Billy,” a female voice said. Lyle and Jace spotted a figure hiding behind a tree.

“Call me the right name!” the guy said, his confidence waning then reinflating just as quickly. “Did you hear what they said? About months of supplies?”

“I heard.”

“L-look guys, maybe you missed the first part. We just ran from our car. We got ambushed. Those supplies are probably already gone.”

“You have a car?”

“It’s dead. Unless you know how to fix em.”

The guy looked around unsurely.

“Look, you ambushed us fair and square. If you want our shit, it’s straight that way on Briar Street.” Lyle pointed backwards, wishing he was pointing straight forward with a gun. Maybe it was revenge speaking, but he wanted nothing more than to shoot everyone in the face. Maybe even Jace too.

“We’re not really trying to ambush you,” the girl said from behind her tree. “We just heard shooting and went to check it out and, well, better to get the drop on you than you on us.”

“No, we *are* ambushing them! I want their stuff! I’m starving, Kimmy!”

“I am too, *Beckett,*” she said with sarcasm in her voice.

Lyle sighed. “How about we meet in the middle? Go back there together and try to save the supplies? If they’re still there and we can get them without getting shot, we’ll split ‘em with you. There’s canned food, some meds, ammo, tampons-”

“How about I take your fancy gun instead and we go get them ourselves?”

“Because then you really would have to murder me. And my friend here.”

“N-no, you wouldn’t have to kill me.” Jace sputtered and waved his hands. “No killing anyone!”

“You don’t want that on your conscience. Innocent people that weren’t trying to hurt you. Ever killed someone?” Lyle stared with stony eyes at the other guy, who lowered his.

“How do I know you aren’t gonna shoot me in the back of the head and then rape her to death?” the guy asked.

“Hey!” the girl yelled.

“Because, we’ll work better as a team,” Lyle said. “I’ll go up front... maybe we’ll have more guys than they do. Um, and girls.”

The girl stepped from behind her tree. She was a tiny chocolatey-skinned girl with a bright smile and shining black eyes, her hair woven into long intricate braids. She wore clean yoga pants and a heather grey vintage Cranberries t-shirt under a black Northface jacket. “Okay, don’t try anything or I’ll be the first to blast. I’m a good shot, you hear?” She smiled mischievously and Jace grasped his fluttering heart.

Another boy stepped out from the woods. “Jerry agrees. We should work together.”

“Who the fuck is he?!” Jace gasped.

A boy of average height, smooth, pale, veiny skin and curly golden blond hair that fell into huge green eyes with a pink hue beneath them, hedged by sharp, ball-like cheekbones. He wore a navy blue cotton jacket with identically colored buttons, the tips of the collars curled inexplicably toward his neck, a white shirt beneath, and acid-washed jeans stained on the knees by dirt and grass.

His face was like a mask that wore the lightest touch of a smirk above a small, cute chin. He smiled occasionally, awkwardly, randomly, as if reacting to an internal world that no one else could touch. And his eyes would narrow momentarily, looking off into the distance or right into yours, in silence or in his brief moments of speech.

“Oh, that’s Jerry. Don’t mind the third person thing. It grows on you after a while,” she laughed.

“Jerry will go back to the fort now,” Jerry said, sauntering off between the trees.

“He doesn’t fight either,” she explained. “I’m Kimmy Wells, and this is Billy Beckett.”

The guy lowered his shotgun reluctantly. “Just call me Beckett. I guess let’s do this.” He eyed them nervously.

Lyle helped Jace up. “Where’s your gun, man? The rifle?” he half-whispered.

“I guess I left it in the car when we ran.”

“Fuck! You can’t just drop your gun! We needed that!”

“We were getting shot at! I wasn’t thinking.”

Lyle sighed massively toward the sky. “Here, take the 1911, but don’t lose it! You know it was my dad’s.”

Jace received it caringly. “You got it...” Lyle wasn’t sure he’d be able to use it like that, holding it like some unblemished artifact.

“Hey! What’re you doing?” Beckett yelled, shaking his shotgun at them.

“We have to work together. And we need as many guns as we can get when we sneak up on the car. I don’t know how many they have or how good they are. They could be professional looters, fascists, anarchists, EPA...”

“EPA?” Kimmy asked.

“Yeah. What’ve you got there?”

“The gun? It’s a .22.”

“Don’t suppose Jerry has something better on him?”

She shook her head.

“Should’ve guessed.” He already disliked Jerry. “Okay, we whisper or use simple hand signs. We wanna go sneaky-deaky-like. Hopefully they’re not gonna expect us to come back with more guys. When we get near the treeline, fan out, check around you and get just close enough to line up good shots on the car and the houses behind it— I think that’s where they were shooting from. Except you, Beckett, I don’t want that shotgun pointed anywhere near me if I go to the car. Watch the buildings. J, you want to fire your first mag along with Kimmy, then use the second one to cover her slow-ass reload, and my ass if I move up on the car...”

“Hey, I don’t have a slow-ass reload!” Kimmy said.

“With that tube mag you do. If we make it through this I’ll get you a 10/22 or something.”

“I don’t know what that means, but if I get some food and tampons out of it, I’ll shoot at whatever.”

“Hope you like rice and tuna.” Their stomachs growled. “Anyway, don’t stop firing if they’re firing, but don’t everyone all go empty at once or they may bum-rush us while we’re reloading. Try to stagger it. If there’s too many, fall back. If one of us gets hit... well, it was nice meeting you.” He thought he heard their buttholes tighten.

They moved. It wasn’t long before they could make out houses, and then the car there on the street, seemingly alone. It was getting darker.

“I can barely see anything,” Kimmy complained.

“Aim for their muzzle flashes!” Lyle said, as he motioned for them to carefully fan out along the treeline. Every broken branch or rustling bush made Lyle’s teeth grit. Beckett went ten feet to the right, as though he didn’t want Lyle or Kimmy out of sight.

Lyle waited for an agonizing minute or two. He suddenly discovered movement in the Buick and homed the donut crosshair of his AUG on it, finger on the trigger. He licked his lips and it took him another minute to muster up the courage to shout: “Hey! In the car! Stay there!”

No response, but the movement stopped. The air was quiet and heavy.

“I know you’re in there! Look, I don’t care what you already took, but that’s our shit and we’ve got ten guns aiming at you now, and we ain’t joking! Get out of there and we won’t have to shoot ya!”

Another silence. Then one of the houses spoke from far across the streets: “Go away! This car’s ours now.”

“I’ve got a lot of friends lined up on you that disagree. Let’s call this a misunderstanding and walk away!”

“Prove it!”

“I ain’t gonna have them reveal their locations for you...”

A shot rang out from the building. Suddenly a firefight lit up the block. A flurry of explosions from left and right and a barrage of snaps from across the street sent bullets whizzing each way. Suddenly Lyle and his friends stopped entirely, and so did the houses across the street.

“Alright, now-!” A shot from Jace with the .45 rang from the left. A few shots zipped toward Jace and Lyle ducked, holding his head. “Now let’s just-!” Another .45 shot, and another return volley of fire that sent Lyle rolling into a dip in the ground, wishing he had a helmet like the war movies. “JUST STOP SHOOTING!”

Ringing and silence.

“We keep the car.”

Lyle collected himself and shouted back: “That’s our shit! We need those supplies!”

“Don’t care, just want the car.”

“But it just broke down!” Lyle shouted, immediately wanting to hit himself.

“Don’t care. Just want the car. And we keep the gun.”

“That front seat gun? Yeah, sure, that’s a nice one. All yours.”

“Ok.”

“So we can grab our shit? And your guy in there will leave?”

“Yes. Already gone.”

Lyle gulped, wondering if he would prefer shooting at shadows and flashes from the safety of the trees over risking himself in plain view... But he *had* volunteered to go in front.

So he crept toward it, ducked low, his blood pumping so hard he could feel it in his stomach, his fingers and his toes. *I’m gonna die here.*

He peeked his head in the broken back window and retracted it instantly. Just enough light to see there was nothing in the seat. All the stuff was there. He popped the trunk with a loud *k-thump* click sound, and nearly jumped out of his shoes when something shattered on the ground. Just his dad’s old green coffee mug with a moose and North Conway, New Hampshire printed on it.

“Looks like everything’s here!” he yelled to his supposed friends in the woodline he couldn’t see. His head swam. He wondered if it was too much luck, if they were just luring him in.

But something precognitive and automatic forced him to get on with it. He threw backpacks and duffle bags toward the woods and grabbed what he could, running it back on quick feet, tumbling to the ground a few times with 40lbs hanging on his back and carried in his hands.

In a few minutes, all the important contents of the car were in the woods, relatively safe. Beckett ran over through the dark and asked, “What now?”

Lyle looked back toward the house and gulped before walking toward the street and shouting loudly: “Hey, listen, we’re not gonna hold it against you, taking our shit and all. Why don’t you team up with us and we’ll all be safer together?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No thanks.”

Lyle stepped back toward Beckett. “Doesn’t that voice sound weird to you? Like a girl or little kid or something?”

“What was that shit, inviting them? We don’t want those crazies with us!”

“Whatever you say, chief. You guys mentioned a hideout or something? Why don’t we haul this stuff there if it’s close.”

“It is.” He whistled and Kimmy and Jace came over, crouched in the falling dark. “It’s over, I guess.”

### 7 - Grabbing shit

They picked everything up and hauled it far into the woods, bitching the whole time. Beckett and Lyle kept looking backward and at each other, clenching their guns, but Kimmy and Jace seemed carefree, chatting here and there and walking close beside each other.

“Goddamn this is heavy,” Kimmy groaned.

“Yeah, that’s the tenth time you’ve said that,” Beckett went.

“What’s this fort you guys got? Is there a castle or artillery fort in town I don’t know about?” Lyle joked.

“No, but it’s something. It’s got a good vantage point high up. Well-hidden. Almost nobody even knows about it,” Beckett told him.

“Almost nobody. Perfect.”

“Look, we’re right here,” Kimmy said, dropping her bags and swaying. “Jerry! Flashlight!”

A white light illuminated inside a six by eight foot shack resting fifteen feet up in a tree, somewhat lost in the foliage, with a crude camouflage pattern sprayed unevenly on it with dying paint cans.

“What the fuck is that? A shed?” Lyle asked incredulously.

“It’s their clubhouse,” Jace said.

Beckett looked sort of embarrassed even in the dim glow of distant moonlight and flashlight as he climbed up an old termite-eaten wooden ladder. “It used to be my treehouse as a kid. We... uh... repurposed it.”

“It’s better than sleeping outside. It’s ours, we don’t get looted or bothered. It’s almost comfy,” Kimmy added, sounding half optimistic, handing heavy bags up to Beckett one at a time with a grunt.

“I kinda like it,” Jace said with a smile you could almost sense through the dark.

Inside, it was a plain plywood box full of dusty blankets and sleeping bags and discarded cans and wrappers. The remnants of a more gentle past life could be seen in the torn corners of posters still stapled into the wall, worn graffiti with messages like “Billy Sucks” and “Authorized Personnel Only” written here and there. A few books and magazines were tossed about, and Christmas lights were strewn around the top of the room and hung from the ceiling from side to side, never to be lit again. A blanket hung covered the door, sealing in the light and some of the heat.

When all the goods were brought in, everyone sat around the glow of the single flashlight awkwardly, except Jerry, who sat in the dark corner alone. Lyle snapped out of his rattled thoughts and remembered his manners: “Help yourselves to some food, guys.”

As if they had been waiting for the cue, they sprung to action and tore through the bags like giant humanoid rats, except Jerry, who picked up a can of beans that fell near him and waited to begin eating until Beckett offered him his hobo tool, a sort of swiss army knife-like camping instrument with a metal spork and can opener.

“Um, there’s a lot of rice left, some pasta, but we’d need fire to cook it. There’s a few gallons of water in that bag, but go easy on it unless there’s clean water nearby.” Lyle unwrapped a pack of stale tomato-basil-oregano crackers from a discount store. She recognized them immediately.

“ Are those from Job Garden?” Kimmy gasped. “My dad used to love shopping there.”

“Mine too. He was obsessed with Local Dealz—you know, they’d give you a gift card for the same amount you spent on some crap. He’d call everything he got from there ‘free’ because he was either getting or spending one of those gift cards.”

“Dude, my dad did them too. All the crap we had sitting around... Those cartons of ready-to-drink soup, boilable vegan Thai dinners, bars that tasted like birdseed...”

“I love soup juice and birdseed bars,” Lyle said.

“BIRDSEED BARS. SOUP JUICE. I’M DYING,” Kimmy laughed.

“You think that’s bad? We ended up with three huge, thousand-dollar swimming pools we didn’t need. My mom got PISSED and made him chill. But then he ended up selling the pools at a profit when everyone was stuck home for the summer, so she couldn’t stop him from buying more crap again. May 2020, before things started getting real bad... But if he hadn’t hoarded up that food, I would have starved.” Lyle looked over one of his cans of tuna. He probably had mercury poisoning from the two or three hundred cans he must have eaten. Is that why his throat was getting sore?

Kimmy laughed. “My dad was the same. He got himself BOXES of the cheap black caviar from there. And so much broth, but almost nothing to cook it with. He always shopped like he was starving. After he passed away, I ended up having to eat most of it myself before I teamed up with Billy—oh, *Beckett* here.” She rolled her eyes. “You’d be surprised how filling caviar and broth is. I think all the salt gave me a heart condition though.”

Suddenly Lyle remembered he didn't want to talk about dead parents. His head hurt. His throat hurt. His heart hurt too. “How did you and Beckett meet?”

“Me and her went to school together,” Beckett answered for them. “We didn’t know each other real well back then, but by the time we found each other, any friend was good to have.”

“Yeah, Billy was real desperate for someone to mommy him and watch his ass.”

“Is it that hard to call me by my last name? I didn’t just make it up. Lots of people go by their last name,” Beckett whined.

“Yeah, if you’re on the football team or something, which you definitely were not.”

“Go easy, girl. Why are you always busting my balls?”

“You make it so easy.” She stuck out her tongue. Jace laughed and Beckett grumbled and sulked.

“It is good to reinvent oneself,” Jerry said casually in his almost ethereal voice, the light making his face look like a *Bohemian Rhapsody* floating head.

“Yeah. Billy was gonna be a cop like his daddy always wanted,” she went on.

Beckett sighed. “I was gonna go to police academy in July, become an officer in Renaissance or Wardon maybe, but they canceled it until things with the virus calmed down.”

“That sucks, man.” Lyle lightly slapped his elbow.

“Yeah. Anyway, we found each other last October. Her parents had just died, and mine... it doesn’t matter. I was looking for food and a roof over my head when a looter started shooting and had me pinned down. I didn’t have my shotgun yet. I was sure I was gonna die. Kimmy came blasting and scared him off, and when she found out it was me, we teamed up. We spent the winter holed up in her house, till some psychos decided they wanted it. We tried to fight them off, but they pushed us out...”

“And set it on fire!” Kimmy interjected. “They took everything they wanted then burnt my parents’ house down for no reason! We just had to sit there and watch.”

“There were at least ten guys there. We’re lucky we got out at all,” Beckett reminded her. She crossed her arms and puffed her lip, giving him the death stare. He huffed and looked away.

“What about, uh, that guy?” Lyle pointed to Jerry with his thumb.

“Oh, Jerry?” Kimmy looked over to him. “We found him a few weeks before we had to leave the house, just wandering out there talking to himself. He didn’t seem to be any harm, but he was hungry and weak, so we let him stay with us until they burned it all down. Now we’ve all been living out of this treehouse the past week or two. If you can call it living.”

“Yeah, I feel like someone who wants to be a cop could do slightly better,” Lyle thought out loud.

“Hey!” Beckett seethed. “I’m working with what I got here! If you wanna climb back down that ladder, be my guest!”

“Hey, hey, I didn’t mean it. I’m glad to have a roof over my head, even if it is nails and plywood. How about you, Jerry?” Lyle looked at him. “What did you wanna be when you grew up?”

“Just myself.” He sipped a mouthful of beans.

“Alright then.”

“I wanted to clean chimneys,” Jace chimed in. Lyle and Beckett both rolled their eyes as he started babbling. “My dad sold wood stoves, so he got me in on that part of the business. It’s great money. Hundred and fifty a cleaning or so, and you’re in and out in a half hour most of the time. And you can clean your own flues, which can save a lot of money, especially if you’re burning a lot of pine. Or paper. Or plastic. But anyway, I fell off the ladders and down the roofs a few times, so my mom wouldn’t let me go up anymore. So I washed dishes until the restaurants shut down.”

“C’est la vie,” Kimmy said.

“Lo-vey,” Jace said.

She laughed from her belly. “I like this guy.”

“Really?” he gleamed.

“Alright, calm down,” Lyle ruffled his hair, which looked odd because Jace was a few inches taller than him. “So listen, me and him just left our places. Jace found me at my house and we packed everything we could in that car earlier this afternoon. That’s everything you see here. Then the car broke down, those... whoever fired at us, and here we are. My question is how have you guys been staying alive?”

Kimmy and Beckett looked at each other uncomfortably.

“When we started running low on supplies at home, we’d loot random houses,” she said. “It was pretty good. You knew everyone else was doing it, because the spots would be more torn apart every time you came back, but people mostly stuck to themselves. You never saw anyone, and if you did, you both ran in opposite directions just in case.”

“But around the end of winter, people got more desperate, or cocky, I don’t know which. Instead of running, people started shooting at each other. First it seemed like warning shots, you know, ‘Get outta my swamp!’ But then it turned into real shootouts, and people would really get hit or killed. We watched it happen three times at least. Just people running others off their corner or their favorite hideout.”

“Probably hoping for a full backpack or a better gun or ammo, too,” Beckett added.

“Right. It got real. You’d hear shots day and night. Big gun fights would break loose then it’d just be silent and you knew someone lost. So that’s why we look like this,” she said, looking herself over like she was a mess, though she looked like cleanliness and godliness next to any of their ragged selves. “It’s been bare bones even before it started warming up. I’m on my last jar of caviar, but I’m saving it for a special occasion. A day we can celebrate.”

“I think you look good,” Jace commented. She smiled gratefully.

“Ever thought of leaving the clubhouse? Er, fort, whatever you call it.” Lyle asked. “I mean, somewhere’s gotta be better than this. And from the way things are going, you’re gonna be starved out before long. What about other houses?”

“Looters took a lot of them, or even bigger groups claiming whole neighborhoods as territory. They’re getting bigger, organizing, I think. They’re either holed up in them or houses nearby. We both tried to find a better place to stay and got shot at almost every time,” Beckett said. “Look, we thought about this already. Everything good is already taken and everything that isn’t taken isn’t good, so unless you have a better idea...”

“We were thinking of going down south,” Jace said. “You know, it’s warm most of the year. More spread out, so hopefully less people shoot at us. We could grow plants, live out of sight, maybe sit this whole thing out in peace. And Lyle’s got family down there!”

“If they’re still alive,” Lyle said. “I’ve made peace with my aunt and uncle being gone, but my cousin Teela is tough. She might’ve made it. And my little autistic cousin Devon. Just maybe. But who knows?”

Kimmy looked at Beckett and shrugged. “I’ve got family in Georgia and Louisiana. Nothing’s changing up here. What could it hurt?”

Beckett crossed his arms and stroked his chin. “It could be a lot worse. My dad had a lot of stories about the south and it ain’t all good. Besides, what if everyone else is flying down there for winter? It’s what the homeless did when things were normal. Imagine what it could look like now. Armies of hobo rapists...”

“Wait, so are they hobos that rape people, or rapists that target hobos?” Jace asked.

“It would be ideal to do something different, Beckett,” Jerry said, his finger held up knowingly. “We must not fear the hobo. They are human like us. And they are everywhere. Humans are everywhere, Beckett.”

Beckett’s arms tightened. “Good point. I’ll sleep on it, Jerry.”

Jerry nodded and lapped up the inside of his can of beans. “I think I will go to bed now.”

“Good idea.” Lyle steadied his shaky limbs. “Do we do lookouts, or...?”

“We’re not total amateurs,” Kimmy said. “I’ve got first watch. There’s a few extra blankets in the corner since it’s warmer out. I’d sleep with your jacket on. You don’t wanna be cold when someone starts shooting.”

“*If* someone starts shooting,” Lyle said, hoping they had had enough gunplay for one twenty-four hour period.

“No, you were right before. It’s just a matter of time we get in big shit... if we stay here.” She winked. “Get some sleep.”

“Hey, I’m wide awake. I can stay up with you for a while,” Jace offered. She nodded and they sat in the narrow doorway wrapped in cotton blankets, legs dangling and heads peeking out into the cold night, talking of little things, whispering and giggling.

Lyle grabbed a blanket and tried to position one or two of the more important bags nearer to him, the day's events turning to a mush of nervousness and excitement, paranoia and hope. Beckett’s mistrusting eyes still burned in his back as he lay down crosswise in the middle of the floor. Lyle faced Jerry, who sat in the corner with an irritating flashlight glowing through his scratchy, blue woolen blanket with dark blue stripes. When Jerry’s face appeared from under the cover, he paid Lyle no attention, just pattering away in a small notebook.

Lyle turned over and saw Beckett staring out the doorway, maybe at the moonlight scattered on nearby branches, protecting them up here in the trees from all the dangers on the ground, or maybe the light that cast shadows past the silver silhouettes of his friend and this new stranger that joined with their small party so suddenly.

Going almost out of body, Lyle thought he felt everyone as a web of loosely connected weary bodies full of unsurety and fear, fighting for or against sleep, struggling for a peaceful moment or a coherent thought.

“I need a big cigarette,” was all Lyle could say.

“I don’t smoke,” Beckett said.

“Me neither.”

They each rolled over in turn and closed their eyes to wait for a little rest.

### 8 - Down on the ground

Lyle woke up shivering with the cold dawn, its light slowly crawling into the cracks of the treehouse. He ached for two hot meals and eighteen more hours of sleep, but it felt like he had slept an hour at most. He sat up to see Jace sitting out the door silently and joined him, rigid and still half-asleep. “How ya doing?”

“Good enough,” Jace said quietly, seeming unusually alert. “Get any sleep?”

“Not much. Doesn’t feel much like spring when you’re basically sleeping in it. How about you?”

“I’m on watch.”

“How’s the, uh, chick?”

“Kimmy. She’s really interesting. She’s a cosmetologist. She’s gonna cut my hair.”

“You sure could use it.” Lyle ran his fingers through his own greasy hair and rubbed his cheeks, which were already getting stubbly. “Guess we both could.”

“Maybe I’ll ask her for you.”

They both looked out on the dim blue woods, where fog and dew and treetops woke with the silent morning.

“It’s gonna be rough out there, isn’t it?” Jace asked.

“I think so.”

“Really rough?”

“Could be.”

Jace sighed deeply. “I just wish things could be normal again. Peaceful, almost like this. I want heat and electric and good food again. I don’t wanna be in a war.”

“You’re telling me,” Lyle clasped the blanket around him, hoping the coming sunrise would warm up the whole Earth and him. “It’s just how it is. We make our own peace now, but it might not be easy. It’s like cutting up your own whole hog. You still get the pork, just takes a lot more work. Gets real messy. But maybe it’ll feel like we earned it when we sit down at the end of the day.”

“That’s funny, man. I’d still eat that whole damn pig right now.”

“Not if I got it first.”

Beckett startled awake and groaned. “Guess we’re awake now.”

Lyle turned back. “Sorry.”

“Kimmy! You left them alone on watch? You were supposed to wake me up.”

Kimmy yawned. “Wanted to give him a shot.”

“A shot at shooting *us?* In our *sleep?*”

Kimmy sat up and shuffled across the room on her hands with her legs wrapped up, like some two-armed mutant caterpillar. She punched down right on Beckett’s head.

“Oww! What the hell was that for?!”

“Because, you idiot, I stayed awake just to double-watch over everyone. You think I could just go to sleep like your stupid ass?”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“You’re supposed to trust me. I hate when people don’t trust me.”

Jace and Lyle looked at each other oddly.

“Sorry guys,” she said. “Takes a little while to earn my trust.”

“Hey, I get it. We’re not trying to shoot anyone though,” Lyle said, “and I didn’t get much sleep either.”

“Neither did Jerry,” said Jerry, scribbling in his eerily flashlighted corner as he was eight hours ago.

“Well, what do we do now?” Beckett rubbed his head, wrinkling his eyes and nose in a yawn.

“Unless you guys have a morning routine-” Lyle started.

“Jerry often pees,” said Jerry.

“...Besides that... We should work on finding a car.”

“And then Jerry and friends eat,” Jerry smiled.

“I haven’t decided on going south yet,” Beckett said.

“Well I have,” Kimmy replied. “I can’t stay and do nothing one more day. It’s depressing.”

“So we pack up everything we have for somewhere we don’t know, that *might* be better, or might be a whole lot worse? We could get killed just on the drive there! Or looking for a car!”

“We could get killed shivering on the hard ass floor of your stupid treehouse, Bill. I’m going. If you wanna stay, stay!”

“Look, no one has to decide right now,” Lyle interjected. “We need a car either way. It’s the only way to stay mobile enough to survive and move around the amount of stuff we need for five people without breaking our backs. And I have a feeling it’ll be easier to find a running car than a place where we won’t be bothered.”

Beckett and Kimmy looked at each other, agreeing hesitantly.

“But that doesn’t mean just a car. We need to get out of the treehouse, find somewhere we can fortify. Get more guns. Stockpile at least a few weeks worth of food and clean water. We all know how to get to Briar Street at least, and how to get to the treehouse from there, so we can meet back here if any of us gets split up.”

“Just hope someone hasn’t taken it by then,” Beckett spat.

“If someone finds the treehouse, it’s better that we weren’t here when they did,” Lyle opined.

“Everything’s up for grabs. But that means we can keep whatever we take, too,” Kimmy said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Right, the world’s your oyster. What about that car of yours? You’re just going to let them keep it?”

“It’s theirs,” Lyle said, looking sorrily to Jace. “We made a deal and they honored their side, whoever the fuck they are. Besides, we got most of our supplies back, which is what matters. The car’s worthless now; we need something that drives. Unless any of you are mechanics. Just finding parts might be near impossible, let alone actually diagnosing and fixing the problem.”

“I miss my dad,” Jace hummed.

They all raised their eyes uncomfortably.

“I know a car,” Kimmy said. “It’s at an old friend’s place. They went out of state before things got bad and I bet it’s still there. And I know where the key is.”

“How do you know it’s not gone?” Lyle asked.

“Because the key’s somewhere stupid where no one would ever find it. So the car’s still there unless someone picked it up and walked away with it. And it’s in a quiet neighborhood. Less likely people camping it. Trust me.”

“Why didn’t you grab it already if it’s just sitting there?”

Kimmy looked at Jerry and Beckett. “I didn’t think we had enough pew-pew if someone *was* there.”

“Fair enough,” Lyle played with his gun’s trigger guard and thumbhole grip nervously. “But it’s not just a car we need. We need gas, lots of it.”

Jace butted in: “We could go to the town employees’ gas pump, by the fire training building and tax offices. It’s basically free gas for the whole fire department, police, paramedics, and town workers.”

“Sounds lovely, but how do you know it isn’t all taken?” Beckett asked.

“I don’t, but I know where the only key for it is. If the chief or a deputy chief didn’t take it, there’s a ton of gas just sitting there.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time,” Lyle said. “Let’s check out Kimmy’s car. If it works, we’ve got wheels and we can go from there.”

“What do we do if we run into trouble?” Jace asked worriedly.

“Same setup as the treeline, basically. Stagger supporting fire, don’t get caught reloading, and cover each other retreating if we have to. We’re not a Marine fireteam, we’re not trained. If we find something we can’t handle, we have to get our asses out of there and hope we’re all still in one piece.”

“Why’re you in charge?” Beckett went.

“Do you want to be up front?” Kimmy asked him.

Beckett looked around the room and to his shoes. “Sure. Yeah, I do.”

Lyle scratched his neck. “If you’re sure. I’ve got a good weapon for it and-”

“Don’t worry about that!” Beckett said in a raised voice. “I’ve got it. Shotgun up close in the front makes sense, right?”

Lyle nodded slowly. “What about Jerry?”

“Jerry stays behind, until we have a better base. He can watch the stuff,” Kimmy said.

“What will he do if someone shows up?”

“Jerry will know what to do,” Jerry said.

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Approaching a brown-shingled house like a barn with a small garage, the crew peered down their gun sights, waiting for the slightest movement. The neighborhood was a long, middle class, suburban road in what was a sprawling farm half a century ago. Maybe only Lyle knew that detail, but it made him wish they were standing in fields of food instead of rows of houses full of nothing, or crazed, hostile, starving people.

“That’s it,” Kimmy pointed. “It looks like no one’s even looted it.”

“You sure?” Beckett asked.

“Sure as sure can be. Get me in there and we ride out with a car.”

The cold morning was chill and silent. It seemed that nothing could wait inside, no matter how much they anticipated it, like no one was crazy enough to be awake this early in the morning but them.

“We might need a little covering fire if things go wrong. Jace, stay here,” Lyle said.

Jace sunk in behind some bushes, seemingly despondent to not take part in the action.

“Either way, I lead the charge,” Beckett said. “We’ll clear the place quick and clean. First man in clears left, next clears right. Call it as you go.”

“Whatever you say,” said Lyle.

“What about the third *man?*” Kimmy asked sarcastically.

Beckett looked stumped. “Watch the back and everything else.”

Kimmy huffed. “Masks on, boys.”

“Why’s that?” Lyle asked.

“There could be infected people in here. Could be new strains that kill us like it got the adults.” She pulled her black bandanna over her face, covered with white and purple and blue paisley elephants. “Besides, it’s just polite.”

They stormed across the street, watching the front windows carefully as they went. They stopped at the front door, Kimmy aimed at the right windows and Lyle aimed left. Beckett waited as if for a cue, then started stomping in the door with wild kicks. The others trickled sweat impatiently.

After two minutes, the door smashed open and a massive explosion went off in front of them. Beckett was pulled back in Kimmy’s arms, panting and wide-eyed. The door had a massive hole on its hinged side.

“Shotgun trap. Holy shit,” Lyle said, pointing up the steps a bit. “Never thought I’d see one of those rigged up in real life.”

Beckett nodded, sucking in the knot in his throat. This was all proving to be too much.

He jumped over the front door’s battered frame, pointing up the steps, and the others followed behind, avoiding the dark stare of the shotgun mounted crudely to the wall, with a thin metal cord leading to the door knob.

Beckett shivered. “Watch left and right like I said. We’re going upstairs first.”

Up the stairs they creaked, watching the downstairs living room, the top of the steps, the hallway they soon entered. Beckett went right, contradicting his own instructions, and swept the master bedroom. They searched a linen closet and watched the hall behind them, Kimmy standing and Lyle crouched and waiting.

“You didn’t get the bathroom,” Kimmy scolded.

“I got it, okay?” Beckett said, inching toward it.

He circled the corner into the bathroom and a scared man with a shotgun barrel pointed at him frozen and staring with a deathly look in his dark eyes. Beckett lowered his gun and realized it was himself in a mirror, panting and sweating even in the chilly, unheated house.

“Goddamn.” He crept into the bathroom, opening cabinet doors one by one with loud slams that rocked the room. He heard a shush from his comrades and waved it off. Under the sink was clear. The bathroom closet was clear. Whoosh! The shower sheets swung open. Clear.

“Clear!” Beckett yelled, to no answer.

“Okay, come on,” an impatient voice whispered from around the corner.

He rejoined his friends in the hallway, feeling confident and sharp and shaky and cloudy all at once.

Kimmy and Lyle breezed ahead of him down the hallway, clearing a few upstairs bedrooms meticulously. “Clear!... Clear!... Clear!” The statements echoed down the hall, which seemed a story of blurry, sweaty uncertainty. Beckett shook his head and followed.

The last room, a corner room with a window onto the roof. “Clear!” Lyle and Kimmy affirmed.

“Did you check the roof?”

Lyle and Kimmy stared at the window.

“Well, check it, someone could be up there!”

They moved toward the window and ripped it open, slamming off the top of its frame. Lyle pointed his gun out as Kimmy climbed out and ran all over and looked toward the backyard. She disappeared over the ridge and there was silence for too long.

“Kimmy!”

“Clear!” she shouted, and climbed back inside. The upstairs was done. Beckett inhaled and wanted to sit for a while.

“Downstairs now,” Kimmy said.

Beckett stirred as if he were already sitting, with nothing to answer. “Yeah, right.” They stared at him for a moment, before he took the lead again. “Let’s do it.”

They stormed downstairs and circled left into the kitchen like real operators. The living room was clean. The kitchen. The hallway. The bedrooms. The bathrooms.

“Let’s hit the garage now, see if that car’s still here,” Kimmy said, panting but feeling almost there. She ran up to the garage door with her shoulder against it, stepped back and kicked it open, staying far back. No shotgun trap.

“Lucky us,” she said.

Then an explosion rocked them, sending splinters from a hole in the wall to the right of the door.

They were silent.

“Lucky duck,” Lyle laughed, knocking dust off his arm. Beckett laughed. They all laughed. Then they remembered the whole world could explode on them at any moment and the laughter left their lungs, and all they wanted to do was stand still lest they trigger another trap. So they rushed into the garage.

A tall, wide, uncompleted frame of a garage made of pine two-by-fours with a few scattered tools yet to be looted, nails and screws and hardware scattered over the floor next to used and discarded supplies, a Mini Cooper sleeping in the midst, dark grey paint pristine in the dusty morning light shining in from outside.

“This is it.” Kimmy approached.

A sound from under a workbench startled them. They all ran over screaming and yelling, “Who’s there?” “Come out!” as they pulled a huddling wretch from the corner. He was a pale, chubby, meek little man with thick glasses, bad skin, gnarled teeth and a light brown mullet with glasses resting atop, clenching for safety as they threw him down, guns pointed.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” he yelled. It was just a kid, maybe sixteen, with a flat, round face, a tiny butt chin and a constant, pathetic sniffle. A chubby little boy with the look of a fat little man.

“Who are you!” the group yelled.

“This is my house. You’re intruding!”

“Jeffy?” Kimmy exclaimed, rubbing her eyes. “You’re still here? For fuck’s sake!”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Kimmy, you dumbass! Where’s your sister?”

Jeffy dropped his glasses over his eyes. “Gone with Mom and Dad. I stayed here when they left, to watch the house. No one ever came back...”

“Like fuck you did,” Kimmy shouted. “If you’re here, Kenny’s here too. Kenny! Come out or I’ll blow your bro’s neck off his chest!” She pulled Jeffy up in her arms and pushed her rifle barrel against his cheek. “I know he didn’t rig this place up alone. Come out now!”

She looked around the silence, Lyle and Beckett ready, guns poised on the doors. She squeezed Jeffy’s throat and he squealed breathlessly like a dying man, thrashing for nothing. It went on for half a minute. She wasn’t even squeezing that hard.

“Okay, just let him go!” a younger voice yelled from above.

They all looked up to see a younger version of Jeffy crammed fifteen feet up in the rafters of the garage, aiming a short-barrelled black shotgun at Beckett and Lyle.

Kimmy shoved Jeffy to the corner, her gun still pointed at his face. “Get down here!”

Kenny released his limbs from in-between the frame and insulation where they were stuffed, one by one, and clambered down skillfully. He reached the floor with a thud, shotgun in hand, standing in front of the silent crew. Kimmy stomped forward and knocked the gun from his hand, smacked him in the face and shooed him to the corner, beside his cowering brother. They looked almost like twins. Kenny was just a bit taller and wider, with lighter hair, while his brother had a darker, brooding look about him.

“Well, this is a surprise. I thought the house was empty,” Kimmy said. “What in the fuck are you two still doing here?”

“Jeff wasn’t lying. Our parents left us here to watch the house a year ago. They never came back.”

“So you rig it up with traps? And just sit here?”

“Where were we supposed to go? We locked down and no one ever came. We’ve been eating what was left. Rice, pasta and canned peas and corn. We hoped mom and dad would come back.” Kenny looked at Jeffy sadly.

Jeffy’s glasses shimmered. “Well, they ain’t coming back, but we ain’t leaving. We did good so far, until you came in. Now what? You want our cans? Take ‘em. We can’t stop you. Watch out for the other traps though. I forgot where we put ‘em all.”

“We came for the car, Jeffy. I didn’t think you two would be here,” Kimmy said defensively. “We’re not scumbags. We’re just trying to survive.”

“The car? Yeah, well, good luck with that.”

“What? Is it broken?” The whole room sank, looking at the fairly pristine Mini Cooper.

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know how to drive it,” Jeffy said. “Good luck if you know how.”

Lyle and Beckett slinked over to the driver’s door.

“What’s it, missing the key?” Beckett asked.

“No, we got it,” Kenny answered.

“It’s manual,” Lyle said.

“Yeah, we can’t figure out how to drive it. Everytime we do, we can’t figure it out. It grinds and shuts off and... we didn’t want to break it.”

Lyle got in and felt the pedals at his feet. The clutch, the gas, the break. The parking brake worked.

“Your only problem is you can’t drive stick?” Lyle asked. “There’s no shotgun or bomb in here?”

The brothers nodded unsurely.

“And you have the key?”

“Give it to him,” Kimmy commanded the brothers. Kenny produced a key obligingly. Lyle jammed it into the ignition. He breathed deeply and looked up, footing the clutch. The car started.

Kenny and Jeffy run up to the car, sticking their heads and arms through both front seat windows. “You know how to do it?!”

“Yeah,” Lyle sighed. The brothers dropped their heads. Lyle looked around the room and realized none of the others could drive it either. “Jesus Christ.”

“Will you teach us?” Kenny asked.

“I could try.”

Beckett threw a small and a large gas can in the back and shut the trunk. “Guess they won’t mind us taking these too.”

“All right, Benton Brothers,” Kimmy said to Kenny and Jeffy. “We got your car working, and we need it. What do you want from us?”

Kenny and Jeffy seemed stunned. “How about a gun? One gun for our car?”

“No way,” Beckett said.

“We need as many as we can get,” said Kimmy.

“So do we!” they protested.

“How about you join us?” Lyle asked. “No fighting. Pool our resources. Bigger numbers.”

Kenny and Jeffy looked around, considering the possibilities.

“No thanks,” Kenny answered. “You can have the car. Just let us stay. You owe us that, Kimmy.”

“Guys, you can do whatever you want. But stay in this stupid ass house? It doesn’t make sense,” Kimmy said, arms crossed.

“We’re fine to stay here,” Jeffy nodded. “Until we find a better place, there’s no reason to leave here.”

“Anything else you want to tell us? About the area? Avoid getting shot?” Beckett questioned.

“Don’t get seen,” Kenny said. “There’s psychos crawling around everywhere, but you won’t see 'em. If you make a target out of yourself, they’ll come. And they’ll fuck you up. It’s better just to stay put like us. Hey, maybe you could even stay here.”

His brother eyed him annoyedly.

“I’m tired of staying put,” said Kimmy.

“Hey, this thing’s almost empty,” Lyle told his friends. “We gotta go.”

“Are you sure you won’t come with us?” Kimmy pleaded. “You guys are almost like weird little brothers. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“We’ve been safe in here for like two years. We’ll be fine,” Jeffy said, and his brother nodded. They both wiped their stubby little noses and sniffled. “Good luck.”

Kimmy stared at them sadly until Jace and Beckett pulled her into the tiny car. Jeffy and Kenny opened the garage door by hand and watched as the Mini Cooper rolled away into the morning. The Mini Cooper was jam-packed with their bodies, and the gas cans filled it with sickly gas fumes.

“We gotta get to the fire training grounds and get fuel in this thing,” Lyle said.

“Why did they stay? They shoulda just come with us,” Kimmy thought aloud, her brows furrowed.

“Were they your friends?” Jace asked.

“They were just... creepy neighborhood kids. My friend’s little brothers. I knew 'em since forever. They grew up around here riding bikes and building camps in the woods and...” she trailed off. “I just don’t get why they wouldn’t come with me.”

“Who else is still alive out there?” Lyle wondered.

“They’re making their own choices just like we are,” Jace affirmed, patting Kimmy lightly on the shoulder.

He waited for his words to sink in and suddenly cure her, make her happy and relaxed, but she just stared sadly out the window.

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They pulled down a sideroad and crossed the bike path. The fire department training field appeared. It was similar to how Jace remembered it. Long fields of asphalt stretched mostly bare, with a big red brick office building to the right and a five-story bare concrete fire training building far off in the distance, some closed-off garages and sheds scattered around.

But it was different now too; the sea of grey asphalt was scorched and pocked with tiny craters all over, with stray piles of spent casings and sunbleached debris. The blackened skeletons of two SUVs were nearby, and a ladder truck nearly in the midst of it all was stripped down to its frame. Even its ladder was gone.

“This place is a fucking ghost town,” Kimmy said.

“I don’t like it,” Lyle agreed. “But better than finding someone here.”

Past an animal shelter half-surrounded by tall chain link fencing around empty dog kennels, the fuel-pumping station sat in the open to the left. One pump was scorched black all over and around, as if the pump had once caught ablaze.

“That’s it,” Jace pointed. “The key for the pump is in the chief’s desk in the tax office here. Yeah, pull in to the right, stay by the trees but point us toward the road for a quick getaway.”

“I got it.” Lyle rested them in the tax office’s parking lot, twenty feet from the entrance.

“We get that key and the gas is ours.”

“What makes you think someone else hasn’t taken it? The whole fire department didn’t disappear overnight,” Beckett said.

“The ones that didn’t get recruited by the EPA didn’t,” Jace replied, trying to feign omniscience. “The chief didn’t tell anyone where the key was. He locked it up tight after the TVs and internet went off. I’m telling you.”

“Then how the hell do you know?” Lyle asked uncontrollably.

“Because I knew his grandson in the department.”

They all sighed, more and more unsure of their makeshift plans.

“I’ll stay here.” Kimmy lied on the floor and disappeared under some bags of clothes and a coat. “Someone oughta watch the door too.”

“Jace has to go in,” Lyle said.

“Well, I’m not waiting out here,” Beckett went.

“Then I’ll watch. Just get back out to us if you see anything. Don’t go shooting.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Beckett popped open the front passenger’s door and marched toward the tax office. Lyle and Jace ran after. Beckett was standing at the door annoyedly. “It’s locked.”

“Ah, shit,” Lyle went.

“Maybe there’s a way in, out back?” Jace wondered.

Beckett growled and pointed his shotgun a few inches from the sliver of deadbolt visible between the metal door frames and blew it out. With the sound of a bullet hitting a metal helmet, Jace and Lyle hit the ground and covered their faces.

“What the fuck man!” Lyle yelled through the deaf blare. “At least let us cover our ears!”

Beckett just shrugged and loaded another shell into his chamber.

“It’s still locked,” Jace was heard to say, jiggling the door.

“Are you loading one shot at a time?”

“Yeah. I lost it.” Beckett pumped it.

“Lost what?”

“The magazine.”

“You lost...” Lyle gazed silently ahead, looking angry till he nearly grinned. He turned his muzzle toward the glass door and fired a shot through it, then bashed the stock of his bullpup rifle through until it shattered to pieces all over the floor. He reached in and unlocked the door, pointing the others to go inside.

“What’s his problem?” Beckett whispered to Jace as they left Lyle to guard the front.

“Dunno. Don’t think he likes your gun or something.” Jace shrugged. “The key’s just down this hall, luckily. Just watch out for ... hey! The old displays are still here!”

A hallway led into the dark, with a guard of six firemen suits along both sides, each opposite one another. They were bulky and heavy, but they looked empty, dead, almost ghostly, hanging on metal stands that distorted their semblance of human figure. They drooped and watched the floor in front of them forever, fire hats with yellow bands, antique hand radios, hosed black masks connected to empty oxygen tanks worn on the back, garbed with weighty, flame-retardant boots, pants, and coats, dull shines hidden under blankets of dust.

Jace hopped from one to the next, looking them over gleefully. “You wanted to be a cop, Beckett? Firefighters are like one step away, right? One fights fires, one fights bad guys...”

“I guess.”

“Look at this.” Jace stood in front of the last suit on the right, pointing to the helmet like a showoff child. It was tall and white, with a great gold crest missing most of its sheen, bearing the department and chief's name and number in darkened hollows. "He was from like fifty or a hundred years ago. Look how fancy his hat is. I wish they still looked like that."

"How do you know about this stuff?"

"Oh... Well... When my parents wouldn't let me go on top of roofs anymore, I got back on ‘em by volunteering for the fire department."

Beckett looked surprised. "So why are you with us losers? You could've been something."

A shadow fell over Jace's face. "Well... My hair was too long and I couldn't remember all the codes and acronyms and stuff. And I fell off the ladders here too. I was only in the department for a few months as a trainee. They called us *probies*.On probation till we could become full members after a year, you know? I wish I coulda been a full member, but some people just don’t have what it takes, I guess."

Beckett scoffed and turned away, looking annoyed.

He marched past Jace down the hall, but suddenly a noise behind them— they looked in horror as the fireman suits fell to the floor in a hundred clanking, clattering pieces, rimmed helmets spinning around like heads cut in half. Both the guys were frozen.

“You okay in there?” Lyle whispered from the front.

It took them a long moment before they could muster up an answer: “Yeah!”

“Hurry up!”

Jace and Beckett stared hard at each other. They were tired of exploding walls and gunshots from nowhere. They gave each other a nod as if to say, “Let’s get this done and then never do anything dangerous ever again.”

They came to the chief’s office. The sturdy grey steel door was marred and scratched like a pack of mutants had tried to get inside, but intact and locked. Beckett blew the hinges off, and as it crashed to the ground, they blew a relieved sigh and ran in.

Jace reached under his metal desk and inside a small section of the bottom that had been cut out. Like a magic leprechaun, he held the key up triumphantly.

They heard a commotion as they came up and found Lyle screaming at a kid a little younger than them. The kid was a ruddy ginger with a generous smattering of freckles, buck teeth, and a wry smile. He was holding up his hands, holding an unmodified Ruger MKIII 22/45 target pistol, a strange black .22 that looked like something from *Star Wars.*

“Put it down! Put it down!” Lyle was screaming. Back at the car, they could vaguely see that someone had a black rifle pointed at Kimmy in the car. Jace nearly fainted at that, till Beckett started pointing and screaming too.

But Jace took a hard look at the ginger kid and went, “Benjamin?”

The kid perked up. “Holy shit, Jace, what’re you doing here?”

“Trying to get gas for our car over there. Just borrowing the key.”

Benjamin stepped closer to Jace and everyone started screaming and threatening louder.

“Stop! I know him!” Jace said.

“Yeah, don’t shoot, let’s talk!” Benjamin agreed. Everyone calmed and breathed a little, guns quaking in their sweaty hands, veins about to burst. “You gotta give me that key, man. You walked into one of the most dangerous places possible here.”

“What do you mean?”

Benjamin stepped a little closer and Lyle kept his AUG trained on this stranger. Benjamin whispered: “I was holding out on the other guys, where my granddad kept the key for the pump. If they find you with it, they’ll rip your head off for it, or worse.”

“Who? The fire department?”

“Exactly. You came here during training when everyone’s out but us. We’re just the guards, but if they come back, you guys are screwed.”

“But... these are the training grounds.”

“Not anymore. The department’s changed, almost good as gone. Looters and raiders popped up everywhere. Most of us who were left from the in-town stations were forced to band together to fight the raider gangs. But we started becoming like ‘em, taking in bad people who were never in the department or stood for helping people.”

“Wha-?”

“We’re called the Firestarters now, and they— we— took over all the old fire department’s stuff and most of its people. They’re out training right now. And training means looting and burning whatever they can find. When you see smoke rising behind the treetops, it’s usually us... uh, them.” Benjamin rubbed his stressed head.

“Ok, ok,” Lyle almost laughed. “The fire department are bandits now, they could come back any minute. Why should we believe you?”

Benjamin shrugged. “Wait around and find out.”

“Look, all we want is a little gas and we’re out of your hair. Just let our friend in the car go.”

“No way. You’ll turn around and shoot me. My buddy’s gotta keep it trained on her till you’re gone.”

“Just point it at me!” Jace implored and they all looked at him astonished.

“I guess that works,” Benjamin shrugged, pointing his gun at Jace’s back and walking him toward the pump two hundred feet away. He shouted to his buddy: “Hey! Let them go, in the car. New hostage. Meet us over there.”

“This is insane,” Beckett growled. “What kind of crazy game is he playing with us here?”

“I have no fucking idea,” Lyle answered. “It’s going just how Jace ideas go. Let’s go make sure Kimmy’s okay.”

Beckett could get on board with that. They got in the car and Kimmy screamed at them both and smacked them furiously. “Hey, you’re the one that got snuck up on!” Beckett protested.

“Jace volunteered to be the hostage in your place so we could get gas and split,” Lyle told her. At that, her eyes glistened as she looked wistfully toward her hero, who was babbling at gunpoint next to the pump.

They pulled the car up and Lyle got out, turned the brass key in a special slot on the pump, and started filling the car up. Kimmy stuck half her body out the window, with her rifle pointed out from her waist like some kind of stinger.

“If you hurt him, I’ll kill you both before you can blink!”

“It’s just a technicality, ma’am,” Benjamin said, sounding older than he was.

“I’m fine, Kimmy,” Jace said. “We’re old friends.”

“Time changes people, eh buddy?,” Benjamin commented. “Look what Corona did.”

“It’s the end of the world,” Jace agreed.

“That’s what I keep trying to tell you. The old fire crew has gone full *Mad Max.* They shoot and steal, and they’re even obsessed with burning books. They burn every book they can find.”

“Wait a second, isn’t that a book? Firemen who burn books?” Kimmy went.

“It’s real.”

“No, I’m pretty sure there’s a famous book about it. Can’t remember the name.”

“If there is, they’ll want to burn that more than anything.”

“This is a load of barnacles,” Beckett groaned from the back seat.

“The car’s full, hand me the cans,” Lyle said, and started filling them.

Jace leaned his head back to his captor and asked, “If most of the department’s gone evil, why are you still with them? Why not run away? You could come with us.”

“Don’t you remember what my grandpa said when all of us were complaining about Lieutenant Beedly ruining things? When you’ve got a good organization, you stick with it through the ups and downs. Because at the end of the day, the good guys will still be there to make things right.”

Jace lowered his head pensively. Maybe they were both in the right place then.

“Some of us are still holding on, trying to change it from the inside and take control again when the time is right. But we have to deal with how things are now: Lieutenant Beedly came back and declared himself the Supreme Chief and set up some ex-raider bosses, the Fire King and Lord Brightfire, as his deputies. He took in every lowlife and desperate kid he could find and turned the Firestarters from a band of scavengers into an army of pyromaniac berserkers.”

As if on cue, a rumble was heard afar off, and hoots and hollers like a party of ravenous wolves. A behemoth firetruck of red, black, and chrome appeared from the distant woodline, covered with gesticulating bodies clad in piecemeal fire outfits and SWAT-style tactical armor. Gunshots and plumes of fire erupted from the beast.

“Holy fuck! You gotta be kidding!” Kimmy shouted.

“In the car! In the car!” Beckett screamed. Lyle poured gas all over his feet as he threw the cans into the car and jumped into the driver seat, getting his AUG snagged on the way.

Benjamin pushed Jace into the car and slammed the door. “Good luck, brother.”

“Come with us!” Jace pleaded.

“Lyle! Drive!” Kimmy yelled. The fire breathing juggernaut was halfway to them.

“I gotta stay and clean up this mess,” Benjamin said. “Now they know about the key. They won’t need to look for gas anymore. They’ll be raiding all over town worse than ever.”

“Lyle! Drive!”

“More reason not to stay!” Jace argued.

“We’ve all got our places. We’ve all got our destinies. Fly free now. I’ll see you again... when the Firefighters rise from the ashes.” Benjamin slapped the side of the car and walked away with his other friend, toward the war-clad fire engine careening toward them. Lyle’s foot finally met the gas and they went sailing off, redlining the engine as he struggled to shift to the right gear.

“Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,” Kimmy muttered. “They’re so close.”

“I’ll lose them,” Lyle promised.

“You better! I don’t wanna die!”

Lyle sped up the road and careened onto the bike path at the last second, but the firetruck followed, less than ten seconds behind. As they turned bends, it would disappear for a few seconds then reappear, with all its horrible screaming, cackling riders, like they were being chased on a train track in Hell.

“You fucked us, getting stuck on here. There’s nowhere to go but straight!” Beckett barked from the back seat.

“There’s a metal post up here where the path crosses the road. They won’t be able to squeeze through, but we will.”

“I hope you’re right.”

As they neared that crossing, it turned out the single post had been replaced by a full barricade apparently built by the fire department. One of their soldiers even stood in the middle of the road.

“Oh no no no no,” Kimmy cried.

“That’s gonna kill us!” Beckett screamed.

Lyle tightened his fists around the steering wheel. He wanted to yell to hold on, but they were already at the barricade— riding on the grassy incline that skirted the path, sending them careening toward a middle school parking lot. Their cries became one horrible shout to the heavens as time slowed, their tiny car flying five feet in the air.

***SLAM!*** It struck the ground and jolted them all to the bones, bouncing and grinding off the pavement, tipping over as they slid and scratched toward the front of the empty school. Lyle jerked the wheel every way in the split-second chaos, trying to gain an ounce of control from the swirling world of crashing metal and whiplashing bodies and disembodied shrieks.

Suddenly the tiny car slammed down just a few feet from the school’s front doors.

They all looked around themselves. Gas had spilled everywhere and made the air unbreathable. Groans, moans, sore bones. Before the windows came down, Beckett threw up. So Kimmy threw up. And Jace threw up.

“Is everyone okay?” Lyle could barely ask.

“Guys...!” Jace exclaimed. Behind them, the halted fire truck was unloading, and a pack of terrifying hostiles was rushing at them with axes and swords and a back-mounted flamethrower spitting fire. Bullets were landing all around them, puncturing the car’s aluminum body, pulverizing the schoolhouse’s brick walls, sending up angry plumes of dust and rock off the asphalt.

Lyle restarted the engine, put the car into gear and prayed to something. And something made the car move. With a horrible sound of grinding and metal clatter, they sped away.

The only sound for a while was moaning and retching. Finally Kimmy pulled her head in from the cool air just long enough to ask, “You say the government is gone all crazy like that? The police?”

“Probably,” Jace answered in her general direction. “The EPA for sure. News said.”

“It’s fucked. I wanna go in the treehouse and never come out again.”

“I wanna go home,” Jace moaned.

“So much for not wanting to sit still,” Beckett mocked them, wiping the vomit and spit from his mouth with the corner of his shirt.

“There is no home,” Lyle chided. “Not unless we make one.”

The Mini Cooper ground to a halt in a nestled section of the woods a few minutes from the treehouse. “This is as close as I can get us without going back near that nightmare car we got ambushed at.”

They got out without saying another word, took the gas tanks and locked the Mini Cooper, vaguely hoping it would still be there when they came back for it. Its front bumper was hanging off, the hood and right headlight smashed to oblivion. The wheels looked like the axle was bent. It was a wonder it even moved.

“Guys, I don’t think I’m cut out for this lifestyle,” Kimmy intimated.

“Me neither,” Jace agreed.

“A gangster’s gotta do what a gangster’s gotta do,” Lyle stalely joked.

He and Kimmy made awkward eye contact. She rolled her eyes and looked away. “I just hope Jerry’s in the mood to feed and nurse us.”

As they approached the treehouse, sounds of laughter hit them like a giant bubble of hot air. They limped and stumbled to spread-out positions and listened.

“Can you make anything out?”

“Shh!”

Just indistinct voices chattering. Suddenly Kimmy yelled: “Jerry!”

A silence. Then steps. Jerry appeared in the doorway.

“You’re back,” he said.

They stared intently, guns aimed up at the treehouse, barely able to hold their sights straight, till Kimmy spoke up: “Jerry, are you alright?”

Two annoying heads appeared beside him, making him appear taller. One wiped a snotty nose and cried, “Hey, don’t point those at us!”

“Kenny? Jeffy?!”

Another head poked out. A plain-looking but pretty hooded girl with long, straight, brown hair, eyes of green and chestnut, and a button nose. Her body and face were slender, with a small, pointed chin and cheekbones. “Hi-yo!”

Jerry smiled widely. It looked almost human. “Jerry found some friends!”

### 9 - Finding friends

The treehouse was packed with eight tired, hungry bodies, and a silence broken only by the sounds of opening cans, crinkling wrappers, and ravenous drinking and eating. Everyone looked confused and hesitant, except for Jerry, Kenny, and Jeffy, who were practically gleaming.

The brown-haired girl looked most out of place, and she peered furtively between Lyle, Jace, Beckett, and Kimmy, waiting to be directly acknowledged. The eating sounds and lack of talk slowly wore on her nerves, and her lips smacked and her nose twitched like a rabbit’s, until finally she broke the silence: “Hey guys, I’m Rachel.”

Everyone looked up at Rachel, then back at their food, except Beckett who kept staring her way when she wasn’t looking. Kimmy noticed, and he noticed Kimmy noticed. She scoffed and they both looked away embarrassedly.

Rachel was a girl who shunned social convention by trying to bring back fads five years too early. She had believed an offhand joke from her parents that convinced her she was George Carlin’s niece, until she was fifteen and some of her savvy friends pointed out that Carlin was much too old to be her father’s brother, did not share a surname with him, and that there was no other evidence for being related to the celebrity. Her parents had long since forgotten about it and even apologized, but the damage was done, sending her down a path of aimless isolation and quiet self-destruction.

Finally Lyle greeted her, “Hi Rachel,” as if they were at an addiction recovery meeting. “I’m Lyle. This is Jace, Beckett, Kimmy... you met Jerry and Kenny and Jeffy.”

“She’s our friend,” Kenny said.

“We found her before we found here,” his brother agreed. Rachel nodded and gulped uncomfortably.

“Why did you leave the house?” Kimmy asked. “You said you wanted to stay there.”

“We would have, but the noise from you blowing up our booby traps brought raiders.”

“Not very good traps,” Beckett commented.

“I’m sorry guys,” said Kimmy. “I never meant to blow up your spot. I never thought you two would still be there.”

“It’s ok. We’re just kidding. We came to find you,” Jeffy winked. Kimmy looked up with a sparkle in her eye.

“Just kidding,” Kenny said. “We wanted to find better food.”

Kimmy growled.

“Just kidding,” Jeffy said. “We didn’t think we’d find *better* food, we were just almost out.”

Kimmy swallowed, already getting annoyed by the mischievous twins. “You could have told me that so I didn’t leave my friend’s little brothers to starve in a half-blown up house... And how about the chick, do you two share her or what?”

The whole room got a little second-hand embarrassment. Kenny cried, “Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!”

“She’s not our girlfriend!” Jeffy assured them needlessly.

“But we did find her first.”

“Shut up!... I saw her first”

“Okaaaaay. As a matter of fact, I do have a boyfriend,” Rachel chimed in timidly.

Beckett sighed a little louder than he meant. Kimmy noticed. Kenny and Jeffy just looked at Rachel waiting for her to announce which of them it was.

“...His name’s Xavier, and he’s a great guy. We’ve got a whole camp.”

“Where?” asked Beckett.

“Peter’s Pond? By Pines Farm and the housing projects.”

“Peter’s Pond? That’s back past the fire department where we came from,” Lyle said.

The battered half of the group moaned.

“She got lost!” Kenny announced.

“I’m not lost! I’m just... I don’t know the area well. I’m from Connecticut. My family usually only stayed here for the summer. I went for a walk... couldn’t find my way back... Xavier said to follow beside the bike path if I ever got lost... I think I followed it the wrong way.”

“You think? You’re halfway to mommy and daddy’s beach house in Quogscut,” Kimmy said.

“Chill, Kimmy,” Beckett said.

“Sure, *Billy.*”

“How big is this camp?”

“Umm, about a dozen of us?” Rachel counted on her fingers and gave up. “We’ve got tents set up close enough that we can go looking for stuff, but far enough from the neighborhood that no one’s bothered us... yet... It’s Xavier’s idea, he’s sorta the leader. But we just had another group join us a few weeks back. Four guys, call themselves the Boogie Boys. Total racist dickhead wannabe soldiers, except one we never see. They think they’re the shit because they’re all geared up... like they’ve been preparing for war since forever.”

“Better than any of us can say.” Lyle examined his bullpup rifle, unhappy to remember there were better shooters out there than him, and probably a lot of them. “So what now? You gotta get back there through bad country. We’re in terrible shape and just came from there, met what’s left of the fire department. Gone all *Fallout* raider-style, calling themselves the Firestarters.”

“Yeah, we know about them,” she said, looking down despondently. “Hey, come back with me! We send guys out to look for people. You’re people.”

“Everyone but Jerry, he’s something else,” Lyle grumbled.

Jerry looked at him blankly.

“What about going south? We can’t just give up on it!” Jace exclaimed.

“Easy bud. We’ll figure that out when we get to it, but we’ve got to get some stability. We’re beat up, barely any food or supplies, and our only car’s falling apart after we jumped that barricade like the *Dukes of Hazzard*. I don’t think it’ll make it out of town anymore than that old Buick now.”

“Hey, that’s my nan’s car you’re talking about!” Jace whined. “Duke Hazard? Didn’t we go to middle school with him?”

Lyle rolled his eyes and smacked his face into his palms.

“You got past a firemen barricade?” Rachel asked, surprised.

“The one on Curtis Corner by the school. Barely made it. The rolling fucking death machine was right behind us.”

“Oh yup, those are definitely the fire guys. I haven’t seen them obviously, but our scouts keep an eye on them. They’re the biggest baddies around. There’s not even any police left in town that we know of, besides the ones that ganged up in Narroquogscut. They’re bad news too. All the real police must have left or died. It’s just... chaos.”

Silence.

“So do you guys want to come? Or do I have to find my way back alone?”

“No way!” Kenny shouted. “We’d never let you go alone!”

“We’ll protect you!” Jeffy agreed.

“Can everyone stop yelling?” Lyle barked. He turned to Kimmy, Beckett and Jace. “What do you guys think?”

“Nothing like a damsel in distress,” Kimmy sighed. “But whatever we do, we should stick together.” She looked at Kenny and Jeffy. “And I wouldn’t feel right leaving these guys alone in the wild.”

Beckett was staring straight ahead.

“Beckett? Yo! Beckett!”

Beckett shook his head clear, crossed his arms and contemplated for a minute. “We need help for supplies if we’re still gonna drive south... We need backup if we’re gonna stay in town... I hate to say it, but maybe it’s our only choice. Not a lot of friendly faces around, especially a group of them.”

“What if it’s a trap?” Kimmy asked.

“It’s not!” Rachel exclaimed. “Uh, look, Xavier’s trying to take in anyone who isn’t psychotic, and trying to hold onto something stable until things get normal again.”

“Normal. Good luck with that.”

“...And if normal isn’t coming, we have to survive and rebuild. All the adults are gone. There’s gotta be semi-normal people to hold onto humanity or else it’ll just be looting and fighting, til everyone’s dead.”

Lyle looked to Jace, who seemed hesitant. Him, Kimmy, the South, a little bit of safety... they were all pulling on him.

“I think we should go with her. We can’t do this alone.”

The whole room seemed to exhale.

“Then that’s what we do,” Beckett concluded, as if his say was conclusive.

“Great! So, like, whenever you guys are ready,” Rachel said.

The four that had faced the fire department that morning groaned and rubbed their sore bones.

“No point in waiting,” Lyle said for all of them. “Daylight’s burning. We can rest when we get there in one piece.”

“That’s a big if,” Kimmy said. “So how do we do it?”

“Well, the Mini Cooper’s out of the question. We’ll have to come back for it later and hope it’s still there. Rachel, do you have any, uh, intel that’ll help us get to your camp?”

She hummed and thought hard. “I dunno. Our scout guys usually follow the bike path, but alongside it so they’re in the woods out of view. A lot of people still use the bike path. I don’t know why. But the firemen patrol it like crazy so... all those people...”

“What do they do with people they catch? Kill ‘em? Force ‘em to join?”

“No one knows,” she frowned.

The air got colder. Lyle hopped to his feet and slung on his backpack. “Let’s go then, before we’re all lost for good.”

Beckett stood up too. “Yeah? So you’re in charge now?”

Lyle looked at him then walked over. “Lemme see your gun... Go on, I’m not gonna shoot you with it. Kimmy’s behind me with hers, and Jace ain’t gonna step in.”

Beckett stared uncomfortably, a vein bulging in his head, then handed it over like it was a treasured limb or his firstborn.

“And five shells.” Lyle stuck his hand out. When they were handed over, he pumped it back, caught the shell and inserted it back in, then began inserting the other five shells one after another.

Beckett turned red.

“You didn’t lose the magazine. It’s a built-in tube mag. Five in the mag, one in the chamber.” He handed him back his gun and turned around, pacing in the midst of everyone. “I’m not looking to lord over anyone. If someone has a better plan, I’ll follow it. But if someone wants to play leader, I hope they at least know what they’re doing.”

Lyle went outside and climbed down the ladder. Everyone else started packing up to follow. Kimmy came and patted Beckett on the back and climbed outside.

Beckett looked at his shotgun, rubbed his thumb down the length of the now-full magazine tube and hummed.

### 10 - On the bike path

“Why did we have to bring the gas cans?” Jeffy whined.

“Fuel for the fire,” Jerry said enigmatically.

“Because the Mini Cooper’s probably going to look like a chop shop hit it if we ever even go back for it,” Kimmy answered.

“Jerry says waste none, want none.”

“Lots of people say that, Jerry.”

“Many people say many things.”

“Do we have to go through the woods though?” Jeffy continued. “There’s prickers everywhere.”

“No, we could hop on the bike path and *die.* I’m sure the fire fuckers would appreciate you bringing your own gas to burn you to death with.”

“That’s a bunch of crap, this isn’t a video game,” Jeffy groaned. “Someone wanna trade?”

“No way butthole, do your job,” his brother said.

“Easy to say, you got the smaller tank!”

“You always say you’re stronger even though I’m bigger. You always say you can beat me up.”

“I’m gonna kick both your asses,” Kimmy growled back, silencing them.

“It’s not that much farther. We have to go into quiet mode now. We’re getting close to the fire station,” Lyle called back in a hushed voice.

“They’re everywhere up here,” Rachel squeaked.

Jace ran up to Lyle, past Beckett and Kimmy who were all at the front. “Lyle, you think we’ll make it through this?”

“I hope so.”

“I’m scared.”

“Me too, man. Every day.”

“I mean, I’ve been scared stiff for like two years, but all the shooting, bombs going off, getting chased by that truck... I feel like I’m in a nightmare and I can’t wake up. I’m shaking inside and I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Lyle remembered his hand was shaking more than usual too. The explosions from Kenny and Jeffy’s house still rang in his ears.

“What do I do?”

Lyle pointed his hand forward like a pistol. “You point that gun at anything that wants to kill you and you shoot til it’s dead.” He dropped his thumb like a hammer. “You make the problems go away till you’re safe.”

Suddenly a ghost of the dead man in his parent’s backyard stood where he was pointing, just like they were in the kitchen again. Lyle withdrew his fake pistol and the vision went away. A bead of sweat ran down beside his eye.

“Lyle?”

“Y-yeah...” He wiped his head. “Look J, I’m not an expert at this. But humans are made to survive, right? So survive. And think about what you’re surviving for. Think about what’s worth fighting for.”

Jace nodded and snuck a glance back at the group. Lyle knew who he was looking at, and punched Jace in the breast jeeringly.

“Watch our back and make sure we don’t get ambushed. You’re a protector. Protect us. Protect her.”

“Who?”

Lyle laughed. “And shoot straight.”

“Shoot straight,” Jace repeated, looking down and thinking till he came to watch the back of their sneaking procession. He looked calmer.

Jeffy and Kenny were near the back of the line too, by Jerry. Jeffy wanted to talk to his brother, but Kenny was too busy practicing his dance moves. Every ten seconds, he would stop and do the ‘Spongebob’ from one foot to another, then run back to his place in the line and do it again. No one else seemed to notice this or how annoying it was. So Jeffy came alongside Jerry.

“Jerry, you don’t seem very scared.”

“Jerry never worries,” Jerry assured him.

“I’m scared. Why aren’t you?”

“Jerry chooses not to be.”

“...I can’t just not be scared!”

“Jerry can. Why couldn’t you?”

Jeffy hummed in contemplation.

“Jerry has another way.”

“What is it?”

“Jerry stands by good friends. This makes Jerry feel better.”

Jeffy thought about that for a minute and stuck beside Jerry.

The group walked on through the woods with nothing but the rustling of brush and backpacks. The quiet was unnerving yet oddly pleasing. They knew their ragtag group was making good time and traveling well through a dangerous area. The sweet oasis vision of a safer place felt closer and closer. Tents meant shelter and new faces. Tents meant campfires and hot food. After two years locked in from the outside world, and a few days or weeks in the cruel, cold wilds out here, there was a general, visceral feeling in all of them that they genuinely deserved a little rest.

This is why it was so jarring when gunmen in tan Nomex fire pants pointing shotguns and AR-15s surrounded them. First the bushes made a sound, then everyone in Lyle’s group had a gun pointed at them. They couldn’t even budge. Some backpacks and the gasoline canisters thumped to the ground.

“That’s right, don’t try anything,” one of the firemen said. His voice was mean and smoky, his matte black semi-automatic rifle authoritative.

Here were something like professionals it seemed, for they had so deftly gotten the better of them. Lyle wanted to appreciate the tactical brilliance of it, the magnificence of such trained coordination, but the pointed assault crown on the end of the man’s rifle was jabbing him in the temple. He could only imagine the anatomy of his own skull, his brain, his brainstem, and how they might look splattered on the forest floor, his friends’ bloody bodies scattered around gruesomely like some Vietnam ambush.

“Who is it that brings fuel for the Fire King?” a godlike voice proclaimed. It materialized into a pasty fat man emerging from the trees with a guard beside him. Despite his pale complexion and gingery goatee, he wore a sort of quasi-Hawaiian garb, a silken yellow skirt with coyote tan boots underneath. A wreath of grass, dog tags, and gold chains hung about his neck, and a flowery, crimson and gold AR-15 slung over his shoulder. A yellow MAPP torch hung at his side.

“Oh my god, he’s really doing this hula thing,” Kimmy said, answered by angry hushes from both her friends and enemies.

“Who dares pass through our land?” demanded the Fire King boisterously, slapping his belly as he paced about, inspecting them. Now that he was closer, they could hear the man beneath the persona, the way he struggled to project a powerful voice.

“Uh, just us,” Lyle answered. “Just passing through. We mean no harm...”

“Silence! All are invited to the Fiery Forever Luau! But first there must be sacrifice. A one for all!”

“Alright Dr. Bronner headass, you don’t need to do this,” Kimmy’s voice shook underneath a mask of faux-confidence. “We’ve got about a million hidden friends pointing guns at you right now, so if you don’t let us go, you’re asking for it...”

“Sweet lies from a troubled maiden,” the Fire King said, coming closer to Kimmy and stroking her face with his stubby fingers. “The Fire King likes his dark meat.” He licked his lips close to her ear.

“Your breath stinks, *Jabba*,” Kimmy snarled back.

He released her face with a push and marched back. “And you! Why should you live?!” he demanded of Kenny.

Kenny looked around scaredly before a light went off in his head. “I can do this!” And he began doing the ‘Spongebob’ and swinging his hands between wobbly knees.

“This is amusing,” the Fire King admitted, seeing something of himself in the chubby young boy. “This is your brother?”

Kenny stopped and nodded at Jeffy.

“Don’t stop!” the Fire King yelped, “The fire must burn on!”

Kenny danced again.

“Surely, you both shall live. And you,” the doughy man redirected his attention toward Jerry “Pokemon Trainer Bill! What is your excuse?!”

Jerry looked at him blankly. “Jerry’s name is Jerry.”

One of the firemen cracked up. “He does look like Pokemon Bill.”

The Fire King looked back at the fireman in aggravation. He piped down.

“You dare use the third person in the presence of the Fire King?!”

Jerry paused for a moment. “A Jerry must do what a Jerry must do.”

“Foolish! Foolish fool!” The Fire King drew his torch toward the sky and struck up its six inch jet of blue fire. “Pokemon Bill must be sacrificed. Bring forward fuel for the pyre!”

Kenny stopped dancing and looked at the big tank of gas next to him. He picked it up and ran it over.

The Fire King turned to Jeffy and the smaller gas tank beside him.

“I won’t let you burn Jerry,” he said stubbornly.

“Would you not be the Fire King’s holy squire? Would you not serve him for riches and wealth? Tables of delicacies? Your every taste in women?”

Jeffy and the Fire King both looked to Rachel, who had so far gladly avoided any attention. She squirmed.

“Not if it means hurting Jerry.”

The Fire King rubbed his chin and looked wistfully to the sky.

“FOOL! FOOLISH FOOL! THEN YOU SHALL BURN WITH HIM ASSUREDLY!”

The Fire King’s guard pulled Jeffy back to back with Jerry and started tying them together. Kenny lunged for them and was shoved hard to the ground.

The group began to cry out. “You don’t have to burn them! Take us alive!”

The armed ones, Lyle, Jace, Beckett and Kimmy were all thinking the same thoughts. Thoughts of fingers on triggers and a heroic last stand. Some of them would die, instead of just the two. Maybe all of them. Maybe they wouldn’t even take out one guy, but even that had to be more dignified than this...

Yet they were frozen as the Fire King poured gasoline all about Jerry and Jeffy’s feet. He soaked them head to toe and made a wide circle around their feet.

“So the pyre will be great,” the King explained, as if reading their thoughts. He stood back staring on hungrily with his lit torch at the ready.

The guard stood back by the King and the other firemen disarmed Lyle and the rest.

“I can’t believe we’re letting this happen,” Kimmy cried.

“Before the Fire King takes his sacrifice, Jerry has a gift for him,” Jerry said, reaching into his pants.

“The Fire King needs it not, for your bodies are the sacrifices that will appease him and make the Great Luau whole! The smell of your meat will tantalize the land! The smoke of your fire will cast my shadow upon the world! So that all may know the Fire King is great! So that all may know the Fire King is terrible! So that-”

Torrents of flame and smoke billowed around them all suddenly. Shots rang from many directions and bodies hit the dirt. The girls’ shrieks pierced the chaos— or was it Jeffy and Kenny screaming?

Dark figures appeared around Lyle’s group, where the fire-raiders had stood, grey ghosts of smoke and digital grey camouflage, holding decked out black rifles like obsidian swords. Lasers of red, green, and blue traced through the scene searchingly, over the scared, defenseless party, scanning the grounded foes for movement.

No one dared move or speak. Suddenly a tall figure appeared through the smoke, a helmeted specter with four robotic eyes and a suit of elite gear like the others and then some. It sauntered past the Fire King’s still body, firing a cautionary round into the dead monarch’s head as he stepped over it. He walked to the center of them, in front of Rachel, weapon held low but ready.

“Always finding trouble,” his voice said through a respirator. It was muffled and alien, yet smooth and confident, like a silver blade cutting through liquid mercury.

Rachel slowly released the tension in her body, then struck his chest with both hands. He barely budged. “Fuck you! I know you made us watch that! You think it’s funny? Fuck you!”

“Easy now,” he laughed. “Maybe the Shadow King still wants to sacrifice these two.”

“Fuck you!”

The smoke began to clear. The group could suddenly see that there were three fighters around them, all garbed like spec ops soldiers.

“So this is what the cat dragged home,” the man said. “Are they friendly, or should we put them against the wall?”

“Don’t even say that!”

He laughed louder. “Are they useful? They don’t seem like it. Ideologically sound? I doubt it. Racially homogenous?”

“Hey!” Kimmy protested.

“I’m just kidding. Can’t be a purist in these trying times. Strange bedfellows and all.” He walked past Kimmy, startling her, then picked up an AR from one of the dead men and handed it to her on safe mode. “Better boom-boom for the soul sister. I’m Spencer.” He shook her limp hand.

“I-I’m Kimmy...”

Spencer lifted up his night vision goggles and revealed almost-human blue eyes and gave her a wink.

“At least *you* spoke up. What, were you all going to watch your friends get burnt to death by these LARPers? Pretty pitiful.”

“You were watching too!” Rachel shouted.

Spencer shushed her with a finger over his respirator, then pulled it down to reveal a neat, strong mouth. “It’s just nice to see how people react under pressure.” He walked close between Lyle and Beckett. “How when people *choke*, people *die,”* he trailed off, right between their ears.

“That’s enough!”

“Right,” he shot Rachel an arrogant smirk, and turned back to the small group. “Your *friends* can loot the bodies, but all the guns and ammo come back to us at camp. Except hers.” He winked at Kimmy. “Can we trust them not to shoot themselves in the foot on the way?”

No one answered. Spencer clapped his gloved hands to startle them.

Slowly they started moving and rustling through the bodies, except Kenny, Lyle and Kimmy, who ran over to Jerry and Jeffy. One of the black-clad soldiers cut their cord with trauma shears and backed away to watch over the group. Jeffy fell to his knees away from the puddle of gas and started throwing up his guts. Rachel walked up and handed them dry shirts from the dead guys. Jerry changed quickly and silently. Jeffy took his shirt off and puked on it.

“You were gonna let him burn me,” he said to Kenny.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” his brother told him.

“We just... froze...” Kimmy muttered, staring at the ground. Suddenly she fell to the ground and threw up where Jeffy did, crying as she retched.

“Let’s get a move on before others show up,” Spencer ordered. “We can be back at camp in ten.”

Beckett looked up from the AR he was trying to figure out. “What if we get ambushed again?”

Spencer laughed. “Don’t you worry about that. We got an angel watching over us.”

### 11 - At camp

The forest watched them on their ragged march. A million pairs of eyes or just one, no one knew, but they each felt like the woods were full of nasty, deadly secrets, things waiting to pounce from the shadows. They never wanted to be caught off guard again.

The three mysterious watchmen seemed alert and confident. They were silent, but for their leader Spencer, who chatted with Rachel and learned the others’ names, and occasionally whispered things through his respirator as if speaking to someone not there. Praying?

Enigmatic and terrible, their position of power was clear. These were their saviors, living proof that there were all too many fighters out there much better and braver than this bunch of kids holding their parents’ guns. They lived at these dark figures’ mercy now and hated it.

“Are we safe with these guys?” Kimmy whispered to Rachel.

“Remember the four assholes I told you about? This is them. They’re dicks, but they’re good at what they do.”

“I noticed.”

“You’re safe with us, little one,” Spencer said.

“How...?”

“They have headsets that let them hear better.”

Spencer tapped the side of his head. “Nonsense. It’s just my Namekian ears.”

“It’s fucking *creepy!*... but I guess it makes us safer.”

Kimmy chuckled a little, against her will. “But there’s only three of them.”

“That’s what you think,” Rachel said, rubbing the back of her head.

Those in the front stopped as a hushed voice called out: “Flash!”

“Green Lantern,” Spencer promptly returned. A man in old hunting camo overalls came from behind a bush with a Savage-Stevens hunting rifle pointed upward.

“Welcome back. Looks like we’ve got company.”

“Yeah, the family just got bigger. Hey, why don’t you nix the .30-06 while you’re on guard duty? You’re not hunting deer.”

The man slapped his side, where a holster was concealed. “Got the Glock if things get close and personal.”

“Good luck with that.” Spencer walked past him with one of his other guys.

“Hey, I’m Michael,” the man greeted the group. “Nice to meet you.”

He was an average-looking guy, but for a scar that ran up his stubbly jaw and into his hairline, where a bit of cartilage was missing from a mangled left ear. Beside that, he had a square nose and honest, dark eyes that looked at you like long-lost family. His nails were cruddy, and his little exposed skin was stained by dirt, so that his camouflage was nearly complete but for the whites of his eyes and the gleam of his big teeth.

None of the tired newcomers felt quite up to greeting him back, though, except Kenny, who noticed Mike was stuffing his lip with a pouch of something.

“Is that chew?” Kenny asked.

Michael looked around confusedly then found the stout little thing questioning him. “Hey there little Hobbit. No, this is coffee. Keeps the energy up.”

“Can I have some?”

“Ask for a hot cup in camp.”

“But I want it like yours.”

Michael laughed. “You’re funny. You like hunting?”

Kenny shrugged. “I guess.”

“You should come hunting with me. How about tomorrow?”

“Sounds tight butthole.”

“Tight butthole?”

“It means ‘good.’”

“Oh, is that right? Gotcha.”

“Hey Mike,” Rachel got his attention. “This is, uh, Lyle, Jace, Beckett, Kim... that’s Jeffy and Kenny. They’re twins, I think. And that’s Jerry.”

“Jerry greets you,” Jerry said.

“Oh, uh, hey there Jerry.”

“They’re all pretty beat up and we almost just got roasted alive, so hopefully there’s food around?” Rachel asked.

“Good smells coming from Cook’s tent. I’d head that way after you talk to Xavier.”

Rachel sighed. “Yeah, I know.” They walked on and she continued, “Xavier’s gonna kill me.”

“Why?”

“I promised I wouldn’t get lost. I just wanted to walk alone for once. Just a short walk. No guns around me.”

Kimmy looked around their group. Everyone had a gun or two but Jerry and Jeffy. Even Kenny had his little sixteen gauge single-barreled shotgun. “I don’t think we’re gonna be gun-free for a long, long time.”

“I know. It’s the new normal.”

They went across wood planks laid over a small creek, then rounded a corner and suddenly tents and gentle plumes of smoke greeted them. The shimmer of a big body of water was just past that.

“Welcome home,” Rachel hummed.

Camp was everything they imagined and more, but of course standards had never been lower. It was Heaven, the sight of a dozen tents with people sitting around talking and working at small jobs like a little village. Surely society had regressed into the Middle Ages but with guns, but it was society, nonetheless.

“People...” Beckett wondered.

“And they’re not even shooting at us,” Kimmy said.

But what really hit them was the smell. Meat. Roast meat over an open fire. The group gravitated toward the smell like magnets and met a blond-haired, bearded fellow who was meticulously working a few cast iron pans over a wide, shallow fire.

“Howdy folks. I’m John Cook. Folks call me Captain John Cook, but as you can see, I’m not a captain. But I am a cook.” He had wiley, friendly eyes and a long aquiline nose, each of which focused intensely on whatever he looked at, and little teeth and big lips. He had a big smile and a wicked handshake.

“That’s a wicked handshake,” Jace said.

“Hey, thanks!”

“John Cook? Didn’t you go to Quogscut?” Lyle asked surprisedly.

“I did, I did. You are?”

“Lyle Detour. I stuck to myself a lot, you might not know me.”

“Ahhhhhh... I think I might remember you. I wasn’t a social butterfly.”

“Me neither. I think I was a freshman when you were a senior, so I’m not surprised if you don’t remember. It’s good to see you. Good to see anyone sane.”

“Ahah, no one said I’m sane!”

“What’s on the menu today, Cook?” Rachel asked him.

“Oh, a veritable smorgasbord. You came at just the right time for sure. I was making a big meal for you and the boogie fellahs coming back, but didn’t know you were bringing friends.”

“Well, the more the merrier, right?”

“More, merrier, yes ma’am, yessir. There’s always more when Cook’s a-merrily-cookin’. Look here.”

He pointed to a mysterious object wrapped in aluminum foil resting over a low fire with a handful of other covered cast iron pans of various sizes surrounding it like a noble entourage. It was putting out a smell that was making the newcomers salivate and hold each other back from charging the hot food riotously.

“We’ve got a fresh rabbit, and when I say just one rabbit, don’t be concerned. This was a fat boy like I’ve never seen before— a big fat New England cottontail who was stuffing himself on all that God’s green earth had to offer, all for us! And one in the hand is two in the bush.” He peeled back the foil from around the rabbit spit-roasting over the fire, reached into the pocket of his dingy apron and sprinkled it all over with a small handful of salt. “Tinfoil’s to keep it from drying out,” he winked.

The outsiders looked at him like he was a madman or a miracle worker.

“Marinated with my special blend of exotic herbs and spices that I call “Captain Cook’s *‘Scavenged.’* — patent pending. Next, we’ve got eggs from the birds, who finally started laying away. I tell ya, it’s good timing all around.”

“Wait, birds?” Kimmy asked.

“Oh yes. Chickens. Ducks. Even one I think is a quail. We’ve got quite the selection. I’d like to get some turkeys here, but I’m not sure they lay good eggs. Who knows? Everyone says they’d eat them anyhow. Maybe better we don’t have 'em. No one eats a one of my birds that I didn’t make up myself. That’s a rule.”

All their stomachs rumbled.

“But wait, the piece de resistance— fresh pork ribs from the pig the fellahs found the other day.”

“You found a pig?!”

“Oh yeah, would you believe it? The guy must have been gorging himself on forage since winter ended. God knows where he wandered from, but he was in good shape for having been feral God knows how long. I felt bad putting down such a healthy, plump, majestic creature, but boy was it worth it. Ham for weeks! But I’ll ration it out so it lasts, don’t you worry.”

“You hear that? They found a damn pig,” Lyle whispered to Jace.

“Just like we dreamed of!”

Cook shoved a bowl of crumbly purplish material mixed with oats into the midst of the group. “And with his commendable sacrifice came one last thing, a personal favorite: blood sausage!”

They all looked at it unsurely.

“Jerry would like to try it,” said Jerry.

“Have at it! I need your opinions,” he said, cheerfully handing off the bowl. “Come back in ten minutes and I’ll have enough for everyone. I hope you don’t mind sharing plates, but I only have so many and I hate doing dishes. Once you get your own, it won’t be a problem. Talk to Delton or scavenge some. Don’t let him give you a bad deal!”

He pointed in the direction of a luxuriously big yellow tent standing in front of a tree, with two big white chest freezers locked next to it and chained to the tree. A huge ginger man was sitting on one of the freezers, looking at them eerily, arms crossed.

“Come on guys, we can eat after we check in with the boss man,” Rachel said, pulling them all away from Cook, who seemed disappointed that the new guests weren’t staying to sample his cuisine.

“Who’d he say— Delton? What’s his deal?” Beckett asked.

“He’s a full-time trader, our one-man store. Somehow he’s got a little bit of everything in his locked-up boxes. I mean seriously, if you ask for it, he can get it... for the right price. One time I complained about the pencil eyeliner I had, and he had a brand new liquid eyeliner a half-hour later. Had to trade him a new box of tampons though. Guess he’ll trade those away to someone else.”

“Delton though? Is that even a real name?” asked Kimmy.

“Right? And his right hand man is Augustus. That name’s definitely real, he went to Queensboro with me.”

“You went to Queensboro? How did I never notice you? What year did you graduate?”

“2017.”

“Then that makes you...”

“Twenty-three, yeah.”

“Wow, you’re the oldest one here I think,” Jace said.

“Ugh, besides Cook. Don’t remind me. So, who else we got from Queensboro?”

“Me and Jeffy were homeschooled!” Kenny declared.

“Yeah, because there’s something wrong with your brains, so you can’t be around normal humans,” Kimmy jeered. Then she looked back at Jeffy sadly. He still wasn’t talking.

“I went to Queensboro!” Jace added. “And Beckett and Kimmy. Lyle went to Quogscut.”

“Well, there’s a few other people from Quogscut lurking around, unfortunately. My Xavier, and Chadwick and Laramie,” Rachel said.

“Wait wait, THE CHADS are here? Xavier Dougan is your boyfriend?” Lyle exclaimed.

“That’s him alright. I guess everyone does call them the Chads.”

“They call *themselves* the Chads! It started as a joke, but they just went with it. Man, those guys were terrible...”

Kimmy and Beckett stared at him.

“I mean, no offense, they’re alright dudes and all.”

“None taken. I understand,” Rachel laughed. “Just give him a chance. Having to kinda take the leadership role changes people. He’s... grown up a lot the last two years. I wouldn’t be around if it weren’t for him.”

Lyle scratched his head as they approached Xavier’s tent. “Are the other two Chads better?”

Rachel laughed again. “No, they still suck.” She slapped on the big grey tent with its red rain fly hanging over the top. “Honey! I’m home!”

The tent popped open and pretty green eyes and blonde hair stuck out. “Woah, there’s mad people out here!”

A pair of blue eyes squeezed in next to him. “No waaay! It’s really him dude!”

They spoke with those posh, beachy accents that rich popular kids often inexplicably had, like they had all been produced in some Barbie assembly plant and escaped from Southern California to infect the world with their bourgeois, everything’s-alright personalities.

The tent flap unzipped and flew open and two beautiful specimens of young men poured out. They were fit, blond, and somehow perfectly tanned, constantly smiling. The only other notable difference between Laramie and Chadwick was Chadwick’s braces that he seemed to have had since middle school. They wore different shades of red shorts and each had pink tank tops on like it was July.

“Bros!” Chadwick started dapping everyone up, despite not knowing most of them.

“Dude! It’s Little Lyle! What’s up, my dude, what’s up!?” Laramie dapped Lyle up and hugged him tightly. “Familiar faces homie! Straight biblical!”

He remembered their habit of making up new phrases and meanings of words too. “Yeah, nice to see you. Could you not call me Little Lyle though?”

“We’re just Drake and Joshing you bro, you know we’re mad tight.” Laramie and Chadwick high-fived and no one knew why.

“Little Lyle?” Kimmy asked.

“It’s a stupid joke. A girl I didn’t even sleep with got really mad and started spreading rumors...”

“Yeah bro, she said your junk was *maaad* small. It was hilarious!” Chadwick said.

“That’s not true. We were both too drunk to function and she was feeling around and... it wasn’t even me, it was my knife... you know, I don’t even have to explain this. It’s stupid.” Lyle crossed his arms and sulked.

“It’s chill bro, we believe you.”

“Yeah mayne, no one cares if you have a small knife, know what I’m saying?”

They high-fived again. Rachel and the rest of them were trying not to laugh, but Kimmy couldn’t help but burst out. Lyle kept looking away gloomily.

“Why do they mock his blade?” Jerry whispered to Jeffy, who shrugged. Jerry handed Jeffy the bowl of blood sausage and Jeffy decided he should try to eat.

“It’s good,” Jeffy lied, his stomach still tied in a knot.

Behind them in the tent emerged a third man, blond, tan and handsome like the others. A white V neck shirt distinguished him and contrasted with his tanned skin, but he wore red shorts too. As he rose up and met Lyle’s eyes, something new from the man Lyle once knew: a meandering scar ran from the bridge of his nose to his forehead. It was a neat enough scar, and it had healed well, but it was unmistakable. A stroke that painted the picture of a seemingly new man.

“Baby!” Rachel exclaimed, glomping on him and kissing his cheeks.

“Glad to see you’re home in one piece. That’s the last walk alone I think I can bear.”

“I know baby, me too. I’ll tell you more about it later.”

Xavier nodded and stepped forward to shake Lyle’s hand genially. “Lyle Detour, it’s good to see you. I hope you and your friends like the look of the place. It isn’t much, but it’s something. Good to breathe the fresh air.”

The only air the group was smelling was coming from Cook’s tent, and the gasoline that was still on some of their clothes. “Trust me, we’re impressed. And not a mask in sight, besides your spec-ops guys. Feels almost normal here.”

“We’re getting there, we’re getting there. I think we’re big enough to incorporate now as a town. Maybe we can get some state funding. We could at least use some food stamps.”

“Oh yeah, at least if you’re official maybe the EPA won’t bother you, right?”

Xavier, Rachel, and the two Chads froze silent for a moment. “Why, did you see any EPA out there?”

“What? No, I was just joking, man.”

Xavier’s shoulders dropped. “Don’t scare me like that. The Firestarters and other gangs give us enough to deal with.”

“I didn’t know it was so serious... I thought it was just a meme, like the murder hornets or the Ted Kaczynski cult.”

“...You didn’t see any hornets or Primitivists either did you?”

“...No.”

Xavier drew another sigh of relief. “How long have you been out of your bunker?”

“I can’t speak for the others, but me and Jace here left my house two days ago.”

“What you’re going to learn as time goes on is that fact is often stranger than fiction nowadays. However true that might’ve been when Trump got elected or when he refused to hand over power to Biden, or when this virus killed off most of the adults, it’s doubly true now.”

Lyle scratched his neck. “I guess so. We did meet the fire department. That was a trip from another dimension. They’ve morphed into radioactive chuds from outer space.”

“You better believe they’re not the only ones who’ve gone crazy. If Hitler came back from the grave *and* got elected president, it wouldn’t surprise me one bit anymore.”

“Yeah... those boys in black you’ve got here are something else too. They’re... disconcerting....”

Suddenly Spencer came out of Xavier’s tent. “We’ll grow on you,” he promised, and walked away leisurely.

“Gotta be careful what you say around here. Tent walls have ears. And the Boogie Boys hear everything.” Xavier tapped his ear, where their digital headsets would be.

“Heard that too,” Spencer’s voice said from far away.

“So how’d you get hooked up with those guys?” Lyle asked.

“They came to us and wanted in. That’s about it.” Xavier leaned in and talked quieter. “I think they want civilization, want people, but won’t admit it. They could have just attacked at night and tried to burn us to the ground. Hell, maybe they would have. But I think they like having something to defend. Civilians to flex on.”

“Are they ex-military?”

“I don’t know what they are. But they do damn good work and don’t ask for more than what’s due. The way it’s set up, they handle most of the scouting and security now, so our guys like Mike can keep a better eye on our perimeter here. They bring in supplies and share a good bit. And on top of our own separate watch, when they’re here, at least one of them is on guard duty at any given time, which is worth two of our guys.”

“At least,” Beckett interjected.

Xavier’s lips pressed together. “Beside that, Spencer keeps his guys in line and I keep the OGs in line. If there’s a disagreement, me and him work it out. We’re sort of like two groups in one.”

“Where does that leave us?” Lyle asked.

“Do you seven have a leader appointed?”

Lyle looked back to the group uncomfortably. They just stared at him.

“We’re playing it by ear,” he said. “Jace and I found Beckett, Kimmy and Jerry, then Kenny and Jeffy later, and Rachel was with them. We almost died more times than I can count. I think now we just need to sit down and think. And eat, if you can spare it.”

“Of course. We’ll work out the details later then. But remember, a body without a head is no good. Please, explore around, meet everyone, but don’t let them walk all over you, especially Delton. His store is good but he drives a hard bargain. Beside that, please listen to whoever’s on security— for safety’s sake— and if there’s a problem, bring it to me. Don’t wander far from camp without telling the sentries. They can be a little overambitious, but they’re getting better.”

“You got it. We can’t thank you enough for taking us in.”

“Someone’s gotta have a little humanity, right?”

“But Xavier,” Lyle stopped him. “Those Firestarters... they got into their gas reserves at the training ground because of... me. It was my fault. We just needed gas, but they came back just in time to nearly run us down on their fire truck from hell. We escaped by the skin of our teeth but... I just thought I should tell you. They might be more of a threat now.”

Xavier’ lips tightened again. “Well, that’s definitely bad news. But don’t blame yourself. You’ve gotta do what you gotta do to survive out there. And if you haven’t lost one yet, you’re doing good.” He slapped Lyle on the shoulder and smiled cordially.

“Thanks...” Lyle lowered his head.

Xavier turned around to go back into the tent with Rachel. “It’s good to meet you all. I’ll take time to talk to each one of you at dinner later tonight. In the meantime, get some late lunch. I know you’ve all been through too much already. Chad, Lar, show them around, guys.”

With that, his tent closed up

“Hell yeah dude,” Chadwick exclaimed. “First stop’s grub!”

“Capitano Cook is a culinary genius, my dudes. A gem to be cherished!”

They were all too hungry to hear. Except Lyle and Beckett, whose hunger was matched only by their propensities to look a gift horse in the mouth. There was too much to ponder to sit just yet. So they meandered about the camp. Kimmy and Jace looked at them as they walked off, but decided it was best to stick together with the others— and the food.

“What’re you thinking?” Beckett asked Lyle once they were alone.

“It’s all too much to take in.”

“We did choose to come here. And it doesn’t seem too bad.”

“Right. It doesn’t. It can’t be. Lyle and the Chads were douches at school, but they couldn’t have become homicidal warlords in the meantime. Could they?”

“Well, the fire department kids did...” Beckett reminded him.

“Damn... you’re supposed to make me feel better about this.”

“I’m just trying to think clearly. It’s not just one day at a time anymore. It’s one hour at a time. One minute. One second.”

“I think we’ll be clearer when we eat. And sit for a half hour.”

“We can in a minute...” Beckett sighed. “Look, Kimmy speaks up, she’s independent, but she’s a chick and she’s younger than us. She follows when she thinks it’s right. Jerry, well, he’s Jerry. And the kids are kids. And you got your buddy on your side.”

“I don’t know who’s on what side anymore. Even this camp’s divided between those Boogie dudes and everyone else...”

Beckett looked back to the group, who were stuffing their faces. “Look, we need to speak with one voice here. They’re already open to it. We’ve just got to prove we’re worth having equal, uh, autonomy here. Get what I’m saying?”

“Kind of. What are you saying?”

“If you wanna be the one that talks with Xavier, fine. You already know him. It might work better.” Beckett seemed to be straining to talk. “Look, I’m not saying I trust you. I’m not saying I want you in charge. You’re just a better speaker... got it?”

“I get you.”

“I know as a whole we haven’t all known each other for long, but if we stick together as a unit, we won’t get dissolved into this camp before we’re all sure we want to stay. So sure, let’s all be friends, see what this place is about, but before we get too comfy, let’s watch out for us seven first.”

“You’re right. But it’s not the Chads that I’m afraid of. It’s the Boogie Boys. They haven’t been here longer, and it’s tough to trust someone who looks like they came straight off of 4chan.”

“It’s hard to trust anyone better with a gun than me,” Beckett confided. Lyle wondered if that had two meanings. “And there’s other things. I don’t trust that girl Rachel.”

“Rachel? What’s wrong with her?”

“I think I know her. I swear I do. And if so, that’s not her real name.”

Lyle’s eyebrow raised. “Then who is she?”

“Let me think about it more. The question I’m wondering, if I’m right, does Xavier even know?”

“I don’t know,” Lyle pondered. “I always thought Xavier was an idiot who only cared about banging chicks and doing coke on boats. But he’s different now. He’s well-spoken, empathetic, nothing like he was before. There’s more going on in his head than it seems.”

“See why we had to talk about it now?” Beckett asked.

“Yeah. Thanks for trusting me enough to. It’s good that you did.”

“Alright, you don’t have to kiss me about it. Let’s get some fucking food. And be tactful with the others about it. We’re sticking together, not planning a mutiny here.”

“I know, I know,” Lyle said. As Beckett walked back toward the others, a voice came from behind.

“Arrivederci.” It was a small, mousy guy his age with longish dark hair, beady eyes, and patchy stubble on his pale, thin face. He wore a tan thermal shirt that fit loosely on him and betrayed his small physique, and a pair of slightly dingy jeans and thin-framed glasses. He had a look somewhere between blank and intimately focused. Maybe he was just tired, or squinting his eyes.

“Oh. Hey there. Lei parla italiano?”

“No.”

“Oh... well... I’m Lyle.”

“Delton, entrepreneur and crypto expert. Not that it matters anymore.” He shook Lyle’s hand. “And you’re the leader of the new guys.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that.”

“Seems like your friends think so. Don’t worry, being a good leader is something to be proud of. Are you a good leader?”

“I don’t know. I just try to help when I can.”

“Hmm. Noble type. Interesting. Well, I’ll try and make it easy for you. Your group doesn’t seem to have much, so they’ll be coming to me, naturally. If I were you, I would see what they need in bulk so you can negotiate a better price.”

“A better price from you?”

“Exactly. Clean clothes in all different sizes. Meds, ammo, favorite foods, a Diva cup, little odds and ends. When they remember these things exist, they’ll want them *now.* It’ll be a big deal, and getting it all together will be best for you.”

“Right... Why not deal with them individually and get the most out of it for yourself?”

“They certainly will come running soon enough, but you deserve a little help in the start. And a happy customer is a returning customer. Besides, we all own a little stock in the village, so to speak.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

“Good.” Delton handed him a stack of papers with fields for requested products, requesting customers, etc. They looked to be printed from an actual copier, somehow. He handed him a pen too. It was engraved: *DELTON INDUSTRIES.* “Bring a completed order form at the first chance you get, so I can get to work on it. The sooner I have that, the sooner you all have your stuff. How you want to handle their payment is up to you. Put it all together or send them one at a time, it’s up to you. You’re not a communist, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good. Here’s a little gift, courtesy of free enterprise. Don’t forget that. Free enterprise is the heart of America, of humanity itself. Without that we’re nothing but animals, puerile, tribalistic, savage.”

Lyle took two square bars of chocolate. Dark mint with coconut and milk chocolate, caramel-filled. “Gee... thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Now you can divide it up among your followers equally, award it to them as you see fit, or pocket it all for yourself. Eat it in secret. Trade it. It’s all up to you. It’s yours.”

“Um, thanks.”

“The whole world is up for grabs,” Delton said, walking back to his tent, “for those who would take it.”

Lyle noticed it was his tent, the large, red, square one. Two locked chest freezers, one gigantic and one smaller, were chained together and to a tree with the thickest chains he might have ever seen.

“Hey! What do you take? Cash, credit?”

Delton laughed, or what sounded like a laugh. A kind of wheezy chuckle. “Everything. Barter. Gold, silver, Bitcoin...”

“You take *Bitcoin?* At the end of the world?”

“Of course. It’s the ultimate currency. Decentralized, digital, untrackable. But I warn you, those markets are pure volatility right now. Navigate those waters at your own peril. Ah, and I take cards.”

“Cards?”

“Magic. Yugioh. Baseball, football, sometimes even hockey. Pokemon cards are king right now though.”

“Pokemon cards... are worth a lot?”

“Oh yes. They’re the closest thing to legal tender right now. Millennials and Zeds both know their valuations pretty well, so they’re easy to exchange. It’s genius, really.”

“But they’re just cards!”

“And cash was just cash, but you would’ve strangled your best friend for a million dollars in the old days, wouldn’t you? No? How about a billion?... Value is what people think it is. Best remember that.” With that, he disappeared into his grand yellow tent.

Lyle growled quietly and walked back to the others. Some of them were laughing. Some were silent, in their own heads. He sat down and slapped Jace on the back.

“What’s going on, man?”

Lyle leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Never show that card I gave you to anyone. It’s worth about a million bucks in apocalypse dollars.”

“You’re yanking’ my chain.”

“I wish I was. Hold onto it tight.”

“...Do you want it back?”

Lyle looked at his honest-eyed friend and laughed. “No, of course not.”

“Well aren’t you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Try some of the blood pudding. It’s really good, man.”

“Only you would eat that instead of the ribs from your dream pig,” Lyle half-laughed.

“I had a little of everything and it’s all so good. Besides, the blood came from the pig, too!”

“Good point.”

“So, you think we’re gonna be good here? At least for a while?”

Lyle glanced around at all the others. “I think here is good. I’m worried how all the action is going to affect us. We’re not made for everyday life or death bullshit.” Lyle noticed his hand was shaking and put it in his pocket.

“You guys wanna let us in on your conversation?” Kimmy interrupted, passing a dish of eggs, ribs, and what Lyle assumed to be rabbit thigh. His appetite all came at once and he started digging in.

“Just talking about the eternal complexities of existence.”

“Surrrre. Well whatcha think? Comfy place, warm food. I could get used to this.”

“One day at a time,” Lyle said. “Just taking it one day at a time.”

“And shootin’ straight,” Jace added.

“You guys are weird,” Kimmy yawned.

“Jerry appreciates everyone,” Jerry said with a smile. “We are all different and the same.”

Lyle ignored him and gnawed on the ribs.

### 12 - The next morning

That night, the promised all-together meal never quite came. The big farm-style dinner table they had fashioned out of five motley picnic tables placed side by side sat mostly empty, with their people and some from camp they had already met coming and going but keeping mostly to themselves, huddled mostly around Cook and his much-needed food. Xavier’s absence was conspicuous, but no one said anything about it. After dinner, most retired quickly to the empty medical tent that had been offered to them temporarily and piled in. For some, sleep came easily, for some not at all.

The next morning came faster than expected. They were still tired, shaking, aching in their bones, but they weren’t exhausted. Their minds had come back a little bit. Beckett and Jace had each taken watch, and the rest of them fell asleep, except Jeffy.

He listened all night to the sounds of his brother and the others snoring, of Kimmy waking up and talking to Jace again, of Beckett rustling the whole time they chatted. Sleep never came. And by the time he woke up his bones felt the same, and his mind felt worse. He knew he should get up with the others; if he tried to lie there all day, they would talk to him.

But he found himself lying down there as everyone got up. Why did he ever leave home?

“Are you okay?” Kimmy asked him once. Of course he was, he answered. She hummed worriedly like she always did, in that way that reminded him of Marge Simpson, then went out with some of the others to the shooting range.

He listened to the vague sound of chatter and movement as he got up and put on his new shirt from a dead man who had tried to kill him. His old pants reeked of stale gasoline and had to be left outside, leaving him drawerless and feeling naked as he went to non-sleep the night before. When he went outside to find them, everyone was gone.

Suddenly he couldn’t forget his loneliness. He was never without his brother. All he could see in camp were strangers’ faces, vaguely unfriendly and doing foreign things. Somehow the whole world had turned against him, or at least forgotten him, and he couldn’t remember when it all went that way. So he wandered.

The sky was overcast and the day was blustery, dreary. It was bright in a way, but full of cold tones, only bright enough to further a headache and torment tired eyes.

He wandered toward the sky and found a small historic graveyard surrounded by a dilapidated rock wall, hidden in the woods. It reminded him of the inanity of life, the inevitability of death, and the forgotten all-too-human stories of the old bones that lay there alone.

It was terrible, and mortality appeared in visions of side profile anatomical drawings and diagrams of flash-burnt gasoline corpses.

But as he wandered toward the cold sun, something caught his eye. A boy in a tree, unmistakable and still, staring out at life like a hawk that may have actually belonged up there.

The tree was a great oak, tall and wide, with about a thousand or a hundred branches. The boy wasn’t half the way up and it still looked like a mile.

Jeffy got closer and closer, hoping to be noticed by the boy, for surely he had the sharpest of eyes from up there. The boy was small, maybe a few years younger than him. He just sat up there, perched and watching.

“What are you doing up there?” Jeffy shouted.

It took a while for an answer: “Nothing really.” The sound of his voice said he certainly was younger.

“Have you been up there for long?”

“Days.”

“Are you coming down anytime soon?”

“Not really.”

“Do you like it up there?”

“Kind of.”

Jeffy thought long and hard. “Would you recommend I go up in a tree too?”

The answer took just as long to come back: “I don’t know.”

Jeffy sighed and looked around aimlessly.

He couldn’t think of anything better than climbing up that damn tree and seeing the whole world, or at least whatever that boy up there saw. He wasn’t giving any answers, so he might as well go up and find out for himself.

So he started up the tree. The lower boughs, thick and twisted, were especially hard to wrap around. Jeffy knew he wasn’t skinny or tall or strong, but he had done this a million times before and he could have sworn it was a hell of a lot easier before.

He faltered and slipped and fell, grasping for the tree as it was pulled just out of his grasp, and came crashing to the ground with a womp that shocked the whole world down to the core. He gasped and grasped and rasped for air. It came back into him and soon sanity did too.

Then he climbed back up.

He started back up the tree a dozen times, till he finally got an impressive six feet up from the ground. It made an oddly sensical sort of sense that the higher he went up, the farther he would be from the sorrows of the common man. It was simple.

“Do you like being... far away from everyone...?” Jeffy struggled to ask, huffing and climbing up the tree.

“I guess,” Tree Kid answered enigmatically. “I just come up here to have a *gandle.*”

Jeffy thought for a moment that climbing this horribly giant tree was giving him some kind of early onset stroke-like symptom. “You’re up there having a gander?”

Tree Kid didn’t answer. He must have misheard. Jeffy climbed higher.

“It’s easy to see everything when you’re having a *gandle,* my momma would tell me. You’re the brightest star in the sky.”

“I don’t know what a *gandle* is. Hey, how do you get past here?” Jeffy was caught at a particularly difficult section of tree. It was incredibly thick, and the nearby bough that split off was as well— too much so to hope for anywhere to grasp. He must have been forty, fifty feet up. A fall from this height would be devastating for his confidence.

“A *gandle* was sitting on the rooftop watching the people, watching the other stars, taking it all in. *Gandles* got me away from momma’s boyfriends, away from the other kids who didn’t know how to *squwatch.* But it gets lonely up here. A *gandle* in the desert, a *gandle* under a bushel, momma’d say. *Quis custodiet?* Who *squwatches* the *squwatchers?*”

Jeffy was hugging the great oak harder than ever. Tree Kid’s words were flying through his head and suddenly the winds felt terrifyingly strong. As he slapped his hands around it for a better hold, he noticed a metal loop screwed into the tree with a short rope hanging from it, a loop on the end just big enough for a foot. It was the only way up, but a difficult maneuver, and if he went for it, he would be committed. How would one ever get back down?

Jeffy’s head was spinning. He was caught by the loneliness of Tree Kid, up there all alone, watching on the far-off world below, the world that threatened to come up like a planetary bullet and strike them both down (or up?) if they fell back down to it. And Jeffy realized, for all its danger and terror, he’d rather be down there where at least there were people to go through it all with.

“I’m climbing back down now, sorry,” Jeffy said, planting his foot and planning for the grueling descent. “I hope you’ll come down again. It’s not all so bad down there.”

“*Chibbles* on *chibbles* for the people. But they do not know...”

“Right...” Jeffy said, trying to breathe deep enough to gain that head-clearing air he so desperately needed.

“The lone and *chibbled* lands stretch far away...”

Jeffy went down— and slipped— and caught on again. Each moment was death staring from above and below. Why had he ever come up here? It was madness. Oh, never again.

But before he knew it he was back down. And there was nothing ever so sweet as the feeling of the crunching forest floor at his feet.

###

### 13 - Gun safety 101

*That same morning...*

A guy was waiting outside the tent as Lyle’s group was emerging from sleep. He had a round, red face and a stubbly brown beard with hair that had grown in from a buzzcut and needed nothing more than another one. He had a thick, wooly blue shirt over light blue jeans, and a pervasive odor of what smelled like perfume and stale alcohol. His eyes were sleepy, friendly and wild all at the same time, and he stumbled over his words as well as his feet much of the time. Other times he waxed verbose and spoke with the sagacity of a scholar. Usually it was somewhere in between.

He wore a large Desert Storm era PASGT kevlar helmet with a Vietnam era jungle camouflage cover made for a smaller helmet stretched over it. The dark olive drab rims and their spray-coated rough texture peeked from beneath the unmatching cover, with the words “BORN TO CHILL” written on it in thick black lettering. A thin coyote tan strap around the circumference of the helm held an assortment of single firearm cartridges of every nearly common caliber.

“Hey guys, I’m Gavin.” He shook Lyle and Beckett’s hands all the while looking in Kimmy’s general direction, then greeted her and Jace. Kenny, Jeffy and Jerry had seemed to have all wandered off before anyone could say anything. “Mike, our resident hunter is off who-knows-where today, so I’ve been chosen to teach you the spectacular and exciting Firearms 101, now including Bonus Rule #5: don’t drop your weapon in a campfire!”

“Did that happen?” Beckett asked.

“Well, don’t wanna spoil the lesson.”

“What’s with all the different bullets around your head?”

“Oh those?” Gavin rubbed his kevlar-potted head. “So I can off myself in any caliber... if I ever get in a tricky situation.”

The group looked at him wide-eyed.

“I’m just kidding! Goddamn!” he burst out. Then the smile was wiped from his face again. “But then again, you never know.”

Beckett looked to the others as if in unbelief at their new assigned teacher. “Well, Mr. Gavin, most of us have already shot our guns, especially in the last couple days.”

“Well, it’s up to you, but Xavier asked me to. A refresher wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

A girl walked up behind him as if on cue. She was fairly tall, with a thick, wavy mess of chestnut brown hair and sideswept bangs. She had a curvy, full body underneath a silky burgundy sundress that flowed like wine. Her red-painted lips drew a smirk on her rosy-cheeked face and her emerald green eyes burned the world wherever she looked. She adjusted the huge, heavy backpack dropping from her strong shoulders. She handed Gavin a red Solo cup.

“See? A refresher!” He drank most of it. “This is my muse and lover Diana, and she too has decided to embrace the eternal and ancient wisdom of gun safety.”

“Never liked 'em. Too dangerous, too noisy,” she said, “but the raiders got me nervous and I guess we’re all supposed to be able to pick one up if someone comes steaming in here. Yippee.” She took the cup back and finished it.

“Let’s have some fun!”

The group looked around at each other and went along with Gavin and Diana reluctantly.

They walked to a nearby clearing about twenty five feet long and ten feet wide with cardboard targets, empty cans and glass bottles set up in the distance. A long sheet of plywood laid across stacked plastic milk crates formed a shooting bench with a couple of cheap-looking guns lying atop. Gavin went around to the far side of it, seemed unsure, then came around to the front of it and nudged everyone back.

“Okay, the cardinal rule is *don’t fire guns around camp.* We’re pretty far in here but we don’t wanna bring raiders running. So we’ve got a lovely little selection of airsoft and BB guns to get a general idea with, and you’ll have to get some live fire time somewhere else.”

“Like when people are shooting at us?” Kimmy joked.

“Yeah, exactly.” He looked at all of them, Lyle with his AUG slung around him always, Kimmy with her new AR-15, Jace with Kimmy’s old .22 rifle and Lyle’s 1911 still holstered on his side, and Beckett with his pump shotgun. “You know, you don’t have to carry those everywhere around camp, it’s what people on security detail are for.”

“Don’t you think it’s better if we’re all ready in case an attack comes?” Kimmy asked.

“Good point. Just maybe put 'em aside for this lesson?” Gavin asked. Their big guns seemed to make him a little nervous. Everyone put their guns at their feet except Lyle, who held onto his as a matter of fact, and Jace, who dared not soil the 1911 by laying it in the grass. Then he thought he shouldn’t put Kimmy’s in the grass either, but she didn’t seem to notice.

Gavin put his drink down and picked up a BB rifle. “So, the four rules of firearm safety. We know 'em, we love 'em... but do we *know* 'em? You, with the thoughts and feelings— what’s the first rule of firearm safety?”

Jace sputtered and looked side to side to no avail. “Uhh, don’t shoot anyone?”

“Wrong! Then there would be no point. Imagine!... You don’t shoot anyone *you don’t intend to.* And that’s the *third* rule.”

“The second,” Lyle noted, instantly regretting speaking up.

“Oh yeah? Then what is the supposedly *real* second rule?”

“You mean third? Keep your finger off the trigger.”

Gavin nodded satisfiedly, his finger on the trigger.

“Your finger is on the trigger.” Lyle hated that he just had to speak up.

Gavin looked at it. “True.” He took it off the trigger and put it above the trigger guard as was correct. “But this is just a BB gun.”

“Isn’t the point to practice the best behavior on the less dangerous guns so we have the right habits when we go to the real ones?” Beckett chimed in.

“...Of course!” Gavin slapped down the BB gun and picked up his drink, which Diana refilled occasionally from a great big thermos that hung off her bag. “That’s the whole point, if your mind isn’t in the right place, you make mistakes, you make excuses. You can’t mess around. This is serious business. What’s your name again?”

“Lyle.”

“Lyle. You’ve even mastered rule 3.5, which is: always tell someone if they’re not respecting the rules. How about that last rule?”

Lyle mostly knew them in order like his dad had taught, so he let them all fly: “Treat all guns like they’re loaded. Never point at anything you don’t want to destroy. Keep your finger off the trigger till you’re actually firing. Be sure of your target and what’s behind it. And the extra rule, keep your guns away from unauthorized people.”

“Now here we have a man who knows his stuff. On paper at least. But can you walk the walk?”

Lyle looked around to check for any signs of sanity, but all he saw were the nice new targets waiting down range. “Are these loaded?” he asked of the table full of BB guns.

“Of course!”

Lyle sighed and walked over, planning for just a moment. He slung his AUG behind his back, then picked up each BB gun and airsoft gun and decimated every target downrange. Cans were felled like so many TV goons, bottles exploded in two, paper targets quickly became unrecognizable swiss cheese, and when the last temporary target was destroyed, he aimed at the old coffee can hanging from the tree and made it ring like a little bell over and over until each was empty.

He put the AUG back in front of him. It was heavy and obnoxious, like some kind of deadly metal robot arm that did nothing until it had to be used in the first moments. But he liked the feeling of it hanging there, ready to go.

“If I may be excused,” he said.

“Wow! Now that is awesome! Here you see the fruits of an intimate, hands-on and *SAFE* command of firearms. You should be teaching. Bravo.” Gavin clapped. Then Diana did too, and soon everyone did. It was hard to tell who was serious and who was yanking his chain.

“Maybe,” Lyle said, and turned away to go. Jace stopped him.

“You’re leaving?” he whispered.

“This is good, you should stay, but I should find Xavier. And Delton.”

“Oh... Well before you go...” Jace took off his belt and handed Lyle the 1911 in its holster with the extra mag. “Kimmy’s letting me use her old one. It’s a lot of kick for me anyway.”

Lyle took it slowly and put it on. “You did good with it... I wouldn’t have minded if you...” He finished putting it back on and remembered the reassuring feeling of it hanging on his side. “Well, don’t shoot your eye out with that .22 — or lose it like the other one.”

Jace nodded and went back with the others as Lyle walked off. Beckett watched him go.

Gavin went on rambling and sipping from his cup. Jace and Diana asked dumb questions sufficient to keep him going forever.

Beckett sighed. Flashbacks to his father taking him to the gun range, taking him fishing, teaching him to drive. Always yelling. Always stop and go. Nothing ever good enough. And just when little Billy Beckett thought he had done well and made his father proud, the most he would ever get was a look of slight satisfaction across his old man’s face.

Beckett slapped Kimmy and Jace on the shoulders and gave a half smile, “Keep an eye on each other,” and turned around and walked away.

He didn’t feel like playing with toys. Hadn’t his dad taught him enough?

### 14 - Happy hunting

Kenny marched through the woods alone. Michael was right behind him, occasionally spitting out juice from the ground coffee packed in his lip.

“What are you looking for?” Michael asked him.

“Dunno,” Kenny said, wiping his nose with his crusty sleeve.

“That’s exactly the point.”

“I don’t get the point.”

“That’s exactly it.” Michael marched ahead of him confidently. “But you’re learning. Look! What is this?”

Kenny kneeled down alongside him. “Looks like a dog’s paw.”

“No, it’s a fresh hoof print... from a real live deer.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You won’t have to once you’re flossing your teeth with a 20-point buck’s antler, licking out a delicious glob of bone marrow from the hollow of a leg bone.”

“That doesn’t sound very good.” Though Kenny imagined it could be good with a harem of hungry post-apocalyptic girls surrounding, feeding him bits of tender meat. Maybe marrow wouldn't be so bad.

“It’ll grow on you. There’s nothing like tearing out the feces sack of a fresh kill and knowing you’ve got dinner in your hands. Imagine how much everyone would love you if you brought home two weeks worth of dinner from your own cleverness.”

Kenny reveled in the idea for a moment but, “The feces sack?”

“No, the rest of it. Except the brain. I’m afraid of prions.”

“What’s a feces sack?”

“It’s the stuff full of guts and shit that you don’t wanna eat or let get on your food,” Mike explained. “Don’t worry, you’ll learn all about it once we start cutting critters open.”

“Do they really call it a feces sack?”

“It’s what my dad and uncles always called it.”

“Doesn’t sound right.”

Michael sighed and got up to walk another way. “A prophet in his own country... Look, you don’t want to be eating any guts or shitting parts. I know good when I see it and I know bad. That’s why I picked this exact spot, for this!”

You could have mistaken it for garbage, the rectangular cage of metal and wood lying ahead. It was a trap made of cut pieces of fence tied around a wobbly frame. There was a disposable aluminum cooking tray in it, crumpled and empty.

“They call these clover traps. Now look at this. The deer comes in here, goes for the food in this dish, hits the line that connects to here. The mechanism gets released and the door comes right down, and bam, you’ve got dinner.”

“Then where’s the deer?”

“...This time he got lucky, but I’m just going to refill it with this corn and this time we’re a-shoo-in.”

“I thought it was a clover trap. Shouldn’t you put clovers in the dish?”

“...Look, smartass, I paid too much to Delton for this can of corn because I let on to him that I needed it. Never do that with him, not with anybody! But I bought the can anyway, because deer eat corn, deer love corn, so I’m using corn.”

“I heard they didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?”

“Didn’t like it. Didn’t eat it.”

“What would you know about trapping deer? It’s the most dangerous game, so much so that it’s illegal in a lot of states. You should respect that. You know what your problem is? You’re smart-alecky. You’re overconfident. You ask too many questions, then you don’t ask enough questions. And worst of all, you don’t ask the right questions.” Gavin crawled out of the cage and tossed the empty can away.

“I guess so.”

“You’re also too timid. You don’t think outside the box and you don’t take in information well. And you’re dry-witted. Not much of a sense of humor at all.”

“I do too!”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about. If I were that cocky, I’d have no confidence at all. You should think about doing that— having no confidence at all.”

“Ok, I will.”

“See? You just accept direction. I could be making up a bunch of nonsense and you wouldn’t know it. But of course I’m not. We hunters need to think for ourselves. Do you think you can do that for yourself?”

“I think so.”

“No you can’t.”

“Alright.”

“See? It would be really rude to say you have no backbone, but I could say I understand why you don’t stand up so straight.”

“I guess I understand.”

“Or why you’re so short. And chubby.”

“Yeah.”

“And ugly. And dim-witted. And your breath stinks. And you don’t think or talk good.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And you refuse to stand up for yourself.”

“No I don’t!”

“And the moment the going gets tough, you lash out— at older, smarter people who are just trying to teach you. It’s a shame.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“How would you know? If you don’t think for yourself, how would you know if you were thinking for yourself?”

“I guess I would have had to be thinking for myself all along.”

“That makes no sense. It’s a perfect example of your problem.”

Kenny nodded understandingly, then looked to the clover trap that had been bothering him for a while now. Of course it should properly be called a corn trap, but there was more wrong to it than that.

He went inside it as Michael watched curiously, and started tinkering with things. The walls made from chain link fences were strong, if only the seams of thin wire could be reinforced and checked. The frame would take some serious reinforcing, but it was nothing that couldn’t be done.

Kenny practically yanked on the twine that should have triggered the trap. “This is too loose. That’s why the deer ate all the food and left.”

“Toulouse is just a place in France,” Mike reminded him.

“Nice.”

“That too.”

Kenny adjusted the string for a while, retying the knot entirely a few times until it was just right. Finally he put his hands over the tray of corn and touched the trigger string delicately. The door came down behind him.

“Hah! Got it!” Kenny declared.

Michael took a moment to consider it all, rubbing his chin and pacing around his beloved trap that had been tampered with. “But you understand now that you’ve become trapped yourself. The results of your own manipulation. Everything doesn’t always have to be your way.”

Kenny frowned. “You wouldn’t leave me here...?”

Michael paced around more. He seemed hard at work conjuring up complex thoughts and deep conclusions.

Kenny whined, already starting to feel like a rat in a cage.

Finally Michael pulled the door up, releasing him. “The solution was always yours. This is a trap for deers. You’re a human, goddamn it.”

“Thank you for teaching me,” Kenny said.

“Right on. Let’s reset the trap so we can bring dinner home. Everyone will love us.”

Kenny agreed and crawled right back in.

### 15 - The secret inside

Lyle was heading back toward camp to look for Xavier or Delton. He needed to touch base with Xavier, and give Delton his party’s rather disorganized list of material wants they spent an hour scribbling on Delton’s order form. But there was no answer as he whacked on their tents and called for them. “Nobody’s home,” he said to himself.

Then, a way off from his group’s shared tent, he noticed what looked like a giant bird of prey, but was in fact a boy in a tree. He moved closer to investigate and noticed Jeffy halfway up that same tree.

Both these things terrified his brotherly side, but as he neared the tree and was about to call up, he spotted Jerry sitting by himself in the dilapidated ruins of an old fieldstone building, whose pillars stood as a testament to a time when others roughed it in the primitive farmsteads of an earlier America.

Was it crazier for them now than then? It was hard to imagine. Were outlaws and hostile natives as fearful a threat as your own young countrymen gone feral? How had those long-past generations fared out here, in their rocky houses now reclaimed by the forest? And most of all, what the hell was Jerry doing there?

He snuck carefully around to the other side— a difficult thing in his hefty waterproof cold-season boots that were starting to scald his sweaty feet as the weather got warmer every day. Nor was stealth his forte. Each crackling leaf threatened to blow the game.

But Jerry just sat there obliviously, scribbling away in that mysterious notebook of his. Was he journaling? Writing a story about the end of the world? Lyle shuddered to think what type of twisted insights Jerry’s head would put into such a dreadful novel. Only a real loon could write a novel about a bunch of kids in a civil war while the real world was burning around them.

Lyle peeked his head up over the rockwall and looked over Jerry’s shoulder, holding his breath. *What is he writing?* It looked like the same thing over and over and over and over again.

Lyle had limits. Lyle had social boundaries. But there was just something about Jerry that drove him mad. So he lunged over the rock wall and snatched Jerry’s notebook. Jerry immediately stood up and tried grabbing at it, but Lyle kept him at arm’s length a few times, walking back and reading.

A horror descended upon him through the words of the pages like stabbing claws of shadow and light, like waking into a luciferian nightmare written by some contemptible Hollywood lizard person: “I am Jerry Pinehalst,” written again and again, page after page. It shifted and grew and shrunk and changed in font and style, steadily but minutely with each iteration, like waves that passed over from page to page, filling each line of the thin journaling notebook perfectly.

Suddenly Jerry snatched it from him deftly and stuffed it in his pocket. He stood there leering, in a position like he was ready to fence.

“Who are you, Jerry? *What* are you?”

“As Jerry says, as is in the book. Jerry is Jerry. Who are you, Lyle?”

“Apparently the only sane person here!”

“What is sane, Lyle?”

“I don’t have time for your nonsense questions or your nonsense statements. You’re crazy, man. Crazy!”

“And what is crazy, Lyle?”

“You’re always so goddamn placid!” Lyle shouted, slamming Jerry against the wall by his collar harder than intended. Suddenly they both felt like they were in a movie. “What are you hiding in that little head of yours? What is the matter with you?”

The miniscule smirk on Jerry’s nearly emotionless face melted away. A shadow moved across it and his eyes darkened. “Nothing anymore, if I’m being honest. This me, this Jerry you know isn’t even the real me. It’s a persona that I live by.”

“I knew it!” Lyle declared, having had no such idea. “But why?”

“I never liked myself before, but no matter how hard I tried, I could never do anything about it. I tried to change, but the people around me knew me and I always got pushed back into my box. So I hid away as much as I could, but when I came out they knew the new face I put on wasn’t really me. Somehow they knew.”

Jerry started pacing and thinking, his hands behind his back.

“I tried to change by joining different groups. You know, the anime nerds, the rejects, the emos, the partiers, the not-like-other-kids. I even tried being a girl, then being no gender at all. Nothing ever quite worked. It all felt fake for me, and worse, they knew it wasn’t real. Somehow they knew.”

Lyle just stared into his eyes, unable to think of a thing to say, his anger turning cold. He had waited for a moment like this since he met Jerry. Every insufferable moment around him had made him yearn to tear the kid’s face off. But now it was like he was staring at the bloody skull and brain and bulging round eyes underneath those curly, ashen locks, and he could only look upon it in helpless horror.

“But this virus business,” Jerry continued, brushing Lyle’s hands off him slowly, “it gave me the opportunity to reinvent myself wholly. I wandered a few towns over to where no one knew me, till I found Kim and Beckett. And to them, I was Jerry. You say that’s not really me, but in fact, it’s as real as anything. Realer even, because they believe it, and I do too. This virus is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“But who are you? Who are you really?”

“I’m Jerry, you goofball.” He flicked Lyle on the forehead with his middle finger and casually walked back toward camp, humming atonally, almost skipping, without a care in the world.

Lyle stood there stunned, watching Jerry return to the fold with his odd, gay gait that somehow imposed yet didn’t threaten, a being whose eyes and words passed through people but didn’t touch the world. He was like some kind of body-snatching, shapeshifting demon moving among mankind for its own enjoyment.

Lyle wondered who else wasn’t what they seemed.

### 16 - The Family

Plied into hosting some live-fire practice, Gavin led them to a small gravel bank fifteen minutes away, where the noise wouldn’t lead foes to camp.

Kimmy was half-deaf from all the gunshots, but she still felt each one rock through her. Each pulse traveled through her arms and jerked her upper body, though she tried hard to maintain her posture. It seemed impossible to get used to the violent displacement of air instantaneously following each trigger pull, or for the human body to understand the sheer power exploding in front of her, the ejection of tiny metal bullets at such deadly high speeds that they defied the human eyes. But she tried.

“Good! You hit it almost every time,” Gavin congratulated.

She pulled the dead trigger a few more times before lowering the AR-15. It was then that she noticed she had been hitting the target next to the one she was aiming at and sighed, dropping the gun in the dirt. She didn’t want this stupid thing that asshole Spencer had just handed her for no reason, no matter how much better it was supposed to be.

Gavin looked a little horrified that the brilliant weapon had been tossed aside, but gracefully acknowledged her frustrations: “Hey, those are really good shot groups for a newbie. I’m impressed!”

“What’s it matter if I can’t hear a damn thing?” She cupped her ears. “Am I supposed to just get used to this ringing after a while or what?”

“Oh, jeez.” He pulled out an unmatching set of disposable foam earplugs from his pocket and put them in her hand. One was neon pink and the other was purple and dirty. “These are vitally important. You should always wear them when shooting or around gunfire.”

Kimmy put them in her ears and suddenly the world went a lot quieter, except for the ringing. “Why didn’t you give me these to start with?” she asked.

“I, uh... I figured you’d have your own. You guys came in with guns and everything. The training is kind of a formality in my opinion, but Xavier thought it was important.”

“You’re supposed to be teaching me the basics and you assumed I knew that?” she yelled, not realizing her own volume— or perhaps she did realize it.

“You’re totally right and that’s my fault.” Gavin scratched his neck. “I guess we’re all learning as we go.”

Kimmy snarled and picked up her gun, then heard muted gunshots next to her. Jace was firing the .22 rifle she had given him. He looked clear and confident, standing up straight, barely affected by the recoil. He emptied the magazine and gave it one last click, lowered it, and looked over to her with the usual loving, blank-eyed stare he gave her.

“Nice job, man!” Gavin announced. “All the shots landed within two or three inches of each other.”

Jace shrugged, looking at his weapon. “This one’s a lot easier.”

Kimmy suddenly noticed Jace had earplugs in, and pulled out her own. “You had those this whole time?!”

He looked at her confusedly then realized, and pulled one out. “Oh yeah, you gotta have these. You’ll go deaf.”

“I already am!”

Jace got uncomfortable for a moment, then had an idea, and handed her his own earplugs. They were little silicone plugs, tethered by a string, that telescoped to fit any ear size more comfortably.

Kimmy accepted them reluctantly and popped them in. She was still deaf, her ears ringing and hurting, but she felt a little better. “Thanks.”

“Sorry I didn’t think of it before. The .22’s quiet so I wasn’t thinking...”

They both looked at her old gun and her new one. One looked like grandpa’s squirrel-shooting rifle and one looked like a weapon of war. The contrast was startling.

Just then a group of two girls and a man came near them. “Is this a class on shooting yourself in the enemy?” a tom-boyish girl asked Gavin, and the other two laughed.

“Oh look, Socialist Rifle Association decides to join us!” Gavin announced.

“We already went through your lovely intro to shooting yourself in the foot without holding the gun,” the man with them said.

“Well maybe you could give these folks an intro to you and your weird bisexual love cult,” Gavin suggested, scratching his eye uncomfortably.

The man nodded. “I’m Orwell, but most just call me daddy or some such.”

“You wish!” one of the girls said.

“This is Grace and Penelope,” he introduced them, sticking out a long, slender tongue.

Orwell was a tall, thin fellow with receding green-dyed hair and a strong chin with deep-set dimples and eyes. He smiled long and often, and his eyes waned and waxed between looking into an eternal sunset and looking straight through you. He wore a puffy tan hiking vest over a green long sleeve shirt stretched over his long-fingered, spidery hands, with brown slacks and red leather dress shoes with pointed tips. “And who are these new friends we’ve been hearing about?”

Gavin looked at his students uncomfortably. His short-term memory failed him. Diana stepped in: “This is Kimmy and Jace. Their other friends either got snatched by someone else or already know how to shoot themselves in the foot.”

Orwell approached Kimmy and kissed her hand. “Enchanté,” he said, and did the same with Jace, who was wide-eyed and stunned.

“Mommy is fine for me too,” Grace winked. She looked like her name, a lithe, joyful little thing with pale skin, full lips, blue eyes, and a head of billowing platinum blonde curls. She wore a black pencil skirt and a pristine white blouse, her nails and lips painted flesh pink. She was quiet and liked to stay close to her two friends.

“If you’re mommy, then you must be...” Jace began, looking at the other girl to make sense of their unusual dynamic.

“Mommy is fine for me too,” Penelope said, squeezing Grace close, then Orwell too for good measure. She was taller than Orwell, with the figure of an Olympic athlete, towering above her friends in both voice and figure. A mixed Native American of twenty-two years, her skin was copper and her hair black and full, though cut to her shoulders and bunched back with a headband, her eyes a vivid, piercing amber. A mottled scar running across her forehead, eye, and bridge of the nose was the only thing that tarnished her beauty.

She wore a thin gold chain, accenting a white collared shirt under a puffy old Russian jacket with the sleeves cut off, and long, black, flared pants over spit-shined, scratched-up combat boots. She was the only one of them armed. An unadorned Romanian AK-47 hung over her shoulder and a Chinese Makarov pistol clone hanging from her belt gave the appearance of a political commissar of the new era.

“Ohh...” Kimmy awed, looking up at her. She winked.

“We prefer to be called the Family, though Socialist Rifle Association isn’t the worst we’ve been called.”

“They’re commies,” Gavin sneered.

“Anarcho-communists,” Penelope corrected. “Don’t mind the tankie aesthetic. I just dig their fashion.”

“And their tanks and guns,” Grace giggled.

“That too.”

“Whatever works for you,” Gavin yawned, and sipped his drink. “There’s something to be said for communists who get kicked out by the other communists, eh? Or isn’t that the usual deal? I forget, all the secret police and purges get confusing fast.”

“We didn’t get *kicked out*, we left on peaceable terms, to find an environment that fits better with our classless, stateless values and create an equitable community there. In the meantime, this place will have to do.”

“Oh, come off it. You guys are as capitalist as me or the Monopoly Man.”

She went up to Gavin and towered over him menacingly. She squeezed his cheeks and threw him back a little.

“Hey!” he cried. Diana laughed and rescued her boyfriend by wrapping her arm around him. “This one’s mine. Pick on a girl your own size!” Their big breasts soon faced one another, nearly chest to chest.

Penelope looked at little Grace as she walked beside and wrapped her arms around her. Orwell joined in too and they smiled, happy as three peas in a pod. “You know how I like my girls.”

Diana scoffed. “Straight and small, you said. Well, I’m as straight as they come. Am I too straight for you? Or too big for Big Mommy to handle?” Diana rubbed her boobs together and everyone thought it was hilarious, except Jace who just about fainted at the unknown forces on display before him.

Penelope picked up on it. “What’s the matter, little man, never seen a big dyke before?”

“I twisted my ankle in one, once.”

Penelope laughed and looked Kimmy’s way. “This one’s funny. He’s a keeper.”

Kimmy rubbed her face and turned away, embarrassed.

“Alright, stop freaking the normal, decent people out,” Diana said, leaning on Gavin like a wobbly post. “Where’ve you guys been?”

“Trade mission to the bastards back at the Red camp. Lots of stuff for Delton, a little stuff for us. Ain’t capitalism great?”

“Delton sure thinks so. Glad you guys know how to speak commie so we can trade instead of killing each other. Ain’t it funny how all the Marx and Lenin go out the window when traders show up to camp?”

“I can’t even begin to unpack everything you got wrong there,” Penelope sighed.

“Then I’m sure you won’t try,” Diana smiled, throwing her backpack down and pulling out a plastic pint bottle full of red liquid. “Juice for the comrades?”

“It’s not for kings, o’ Lemuel,” she answered, but Grace unwrapped from her instantly and took the bottle and drank.

“No gods or kings,” Grace said, wiping her lip. Orwell stepped in and snatched it too, drinking the rest.

“Thanks, honey,” he burped. He threw it back to Diana, who nearly dropped it.

“Hey, don’t mention it...” Diana considered her empty bottle and stuffed it away, throwing the heavy pack over her shoulder again. She seemed titanic in her ability to carry it. “Hey, aren’t the Reds supposed to kill you if you go back to their camp?”

“I waited outside their territory like a sad little mouse,” Orwell admitted, puffing his lip.

“That’s too bad,” Diana said. “Guess you really are one of us now, eh?”

Orwell shrugged.

Gavin stopped tapping his foot and turned toward the others. “Well, um, I guess that’s class dismissed for today folks. I hope everyone’s confident in their newfound ability to use a firearm safely.”

Kimmy, Jace and Diana just looked at him blankly and shrugged. The Family started giggling.

“Oh, he’s a dreadful bore, isn’t he? Come on, sweeties, we’ll show you around and give you all the gossip,” Orwell said, wrapping Kimmy and Jace up in his wicked tendrils and taking them off. Grace and Penelope followed.

“You can just, uh, pay me for the wine later,” Diana shouted as they went.

Grace laughed. “I thought it was a gift! No fair!”

“Consider it your contribution to the revolution!” Penelope said.

“The revolution better pay its tab soon!” Diana yelled. The air went out of her and she slowly fell to her knees. Gavin knelt beside her.

“Buncha smarmy gaylords,” he said.

“Yeah... Wanna play with the BB guns?”

“Hell yeah!” They kissed and it tasted like wine.

### 17 - Beckett and Kimmy

“I can’t go out again. He knows I messed up again. I can’t,” Rachel said in a hushed voice, off in the woods just outside of camp.

The man beside her was silent for a moment. “That’s your decision, but I can’t help you with your problem inside of here.”

She was silent.

“You know that.”

“I get it. Shut up!” she nearly shouted, then looked around, quieting herself. “I’m thinking, okay?”

“Well, figure it out. Nothing in life comes free.” With that, he disappeared and left her there alone.

Beckett was watching from behind a tree nearby. He watched her standing there, his mind trying to put it all together. That’s when Kimmy tapped him on the shoulder.

“Billy! What are you up to?”

Beckett shushed her and pushed her behind him. He looked back and Rachel was gone.

“What’re you doing?!” he nearly yelled at Kimmy.

“Interrupting something, I guess?” she said.

“You’re not...” He looked back again. “Fuck.”

“What’s your problem?”

Beckett went to walk away then wheeled around again and huffed. “Nothing, okay?”

Rachel suddenly appeared near them. “Oh, hey guys.”

“Hi,” Kimmy said unenthusiastically.

“Just taking a wizz. The port-o-potty had a line and... you know, when you gotta go...”

“There’s a port-o-potty?” Kimmy asked curiously.

“Behind Delton’s. It’s usually free, but he charges for a better place in line for the morning rush though, or if everyone gets the runs from a bad meal,” Rachel said.

Kimmy and Beckett just looked at her.

“Well, sorry for interrupting,” she said, leaving them.

“Just taking a wizz, huh?” Kimmy rolled her eyes.

Beckett didn’t comment. He was thinking.

“So what’s your issue?”

He took a moment then looked at her harshly. “Me? What’s your issue? Always going around like you run the place. The sassy black girl thing doesn’t work as well as you think it does.”

Kimmy caught a gasp and laughed incredulously, her mouth ajar. “Oh, well, there it goes. See, at least *that* I know is actually you, even if you’re being an asshole.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do. That’s the point.”

“Whatever.”

“You haven’t been right since we met up with Lyle and Jace and them. You got a real stick up your ass.”

“Whatever.”

“Yeah. More than usual, too. You’re acting like a little bitch. What is it? Lyle raining on your power trip with his cool gun? Showing you up?”

“Now *you’re* being a bitch.”

“So it’s not just him, it’s not *almost dying* a bunch of times, it’s Jace you got a problem with, right?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Jace, Jace, Jace. Did I stutter? What’s your problem with him? Ever since we started hanging out you’ve been shooting us the stink eye from your sad little corner of the room. At least until you saw Rachel show up. Guess you’ve got new eye candy.”

“So now it’s about her?”

“It’s about whatever you want it to be, Bill. It always is. But least you could do is fucking talk about it.”

“This is me talking about it.”

“Yeah, you’re doing a great job.” Kimmy clapped.

“So what do you want me to say? He’s a twerp. He’s an idiot. You don’t seem to mind that.”

“No, I try to see the best in people. You might want to give it a try. It’s how I put up with you.”

Beckett seemed taken by that and bit his lip in pain.

“We luck out on some nice people that at least kind of know what they’re doing and end up here where it’s supposedly safe, and you’re still moping, and worse, you don’t even talk to me about it? How do you expect me to feel? I’m just saying what I see. I don’t like this brooding thing with you. You’re like a kid who got his toy broken and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“...I just miss when it was me and you. It was simpler.”

“Well life isn’t always how you want it. Your dad sucked and you’re never gonna be a cop. And we’re gonna meet new people... and get close to them sometimes. Get over it.”

“I am over it.” Beckett sniffed and turned away.

“Yeah, I can see that.” Kimmy crossed her arms and sighed. “Look, I liked when it was just us too. And even with Jerry. It was a good thing. But things change. And when everything’s this crazy, we gotta take things as they come and appreciate it. That doesn’t have to change me and you. But we gotta keep working together. Talk. Use our words... Jace is nice. But he isn’t close to me like you are. He’s not you.”

Beckett looked at her hopefully, then looked away again. “I don’t care about that.”

“Well I do. And I know you do too. Me and you got a special thing. I respect that. Nothing can ever make that go away. Not him, not crazy murderers, not no one.”

Beckett just stared ahead.

“Do you care about that? Do you feel the same way?”

Beckett was silent for a long moment, then he pulled Kimmy toward him, wrapped her up in one arm and kissed her on the forehead. They stared out into the neverending forest, both treacherous wilderness and protecting home, and felt home with each other there, happy to be all alone.

Except Jace had been listening. He ran away quietly, a tear in the dirt where he stood.

### 18 - Mediator

Lyle slapped down the group’s order form on a white plastic fold-out table in Delton’s spacious tent. It was a confused mess of various hands’ scribbles and erasures that had faded the organized columns and rows of Delton’s wonderfully recreated piece of civilization on paper. His dour eyes scanned it as Lyle watched. Suddenly he chuckled in his grim, nasally way.

“Oh, this isn’t good. Not good at all.”

“What’s that?” Lyle raised his eyebrow.

“Your people have no concept of the goods they need. That’s abundantly clear.”

“It’s what they want,” Lyle shrugged. “We’ve been out in it for days, weeks, months, some of us. I think they have an idea of what they could use for now.”

“Mmm, yes. They’ll learn down the road I suppose. I can get it all, of course, but I notice the things you’re offering in return are, hmm, scant.”

“Right. We don’t have much yet. I’m sure we’ll have more to offer as we work more around camp, but most of it’s going straight to camp. Kenny and Mike are bringing in small game but it goes to Cook. We’ve started training for sentry shifts, but it’s not like we get paid. I don’t suppose you take credit?”

Delton shook his head. “I’m afraid the market’s much too unstable for that, but I could consider lines of equity.”

Lyle noticed Delton was staring at his AUG with those grim, valuating eyes of his. Lyle turned away as if to hide it protectively under his coat. “Oh, no way man. No way.”

“You don’t have to sell it straightaway. Indeed, it’s worth a small fortune here. It’s the best gun in camp, besides the Boogie Boys’ automatics, which could each set up an individual very handsomely.”

“Do you have to talk like a *Skyrim* vendor all the time?” Lyle sighed, looking at his gun. It was a magnificent weapon, effective and easy to shoot, deadly and accurate, and unusual in its bullpup design, the magazine back in the stock, the black scope and receiver one piece, the simple lines of coyote tan camouflage painted onto it by his grandmother at his grandfather’s request. In short, an exceptional weapon and a family heirloom.

And that was why he couldn’t risk trading it or losing it in debt. As a weapon, it was replaceable— he could make do with whatever cheaper rifle he could get his hands on. Its value could probably buy two or three AR-15’s, which were easier to find and easily customizable with more readily-available accessories and parts, and fired the same deadly 5.56×45mm NATO rounds. But it contained a piece of his grandfather’s spirit, of his father, in a thing he could hold in his hands and use to preserve him and his friends.

It was both tool and symbol of the past, present, and future.

“It’s a simple line of equity,” Delton interrupted his thoughts. “You could borrow as little or as much against it as you like and it would never be forfeit, unless of course you defaulted on your repayments. But you’re more prudent than that. And it seems the prudent thing to do for things your comrades need now.”

“I can’t. I won’t. There has to be another way.”

“Mmm.” Delton rubbed his stubbly chin and twiddled his fingers like some kind of abacus and paced. “There could be. I assume you’re familiar with looting for what you need?”

“Of course, how else could we have made it here?”

“Of course. Well, I have my own list of needs, and it’s constantly fluctuating and changing as the market dictates.” Delton stuffed a crumpled paper in Lyle’s hand. “Of course, I could find a use for almost anything useful you find, but the market has her demands, and looting is dangerous business. It takes patience, forethought and a sharp eye to find what will bring you the most profit— er, value I should say.”

Lyle looked over the list. Delton’s handwriting looked like 17th century script. “Batteries, 2025 and 2023 type especially, for all those gun accessories... Gucci clothing, certain knockoffs acceptable. Cards, cards, cards. Shoes. Air Jordans... seriously? People want this crap now?”

“Oh yes. De gustibus non est disputandum.”

“And tampons. Always tampons.”

“There’s, of course, plenty of accounting for that one. Though most of them have long wise up and moved to reusable silicone sanitary cups. And don’t forget the makeup products.”

“What about our cold weather clothes? It still gets freezing at night. And even during the day sometimes. What are you going to do with them in a month when it’s warm anyway? Stocking up for next winter already?”

Delton shrugged. “Sure, they’re not as valuable as the warm weather clothes that will be needed any day now. Nor as valuable as the tactical gear your fighters need— you don’t know it yet, but you do need it. Comfort, security, everything in between. All just an order form away, for the right price.”

Lyle gave the paper one last frustrated look and stuck it in his pocket and put his hand over his head, feeling a headache coming on. “We can barely take a piss ten feet outside the perimeter. How am I supposed to convince Xavier to let us newbies go out to loot for shit to trade you, especially while the fire fuckers fifteen minutes away are all riled up? We stirred up the hornet’s nest and Spencer and his crew killed a deputy chief to boot.”

“You’re resourceful.” Delton said finally, turning around to return to his grandiose yellow tent, that grew everyday more into a palace as junk piled up beside it or adorned its outside— a sample of the many more wares that Delton seemed to produce as if from nothing, but wares nonetheless, everything always for sale.

Lyle went to follow him and a hulking brute blocked his way with crossed arms, a great freckly orangutan of a man with thick limbs and massive hands.. His eyes were small and cold and condescending, peering down like bowmen from a high tower, his thick lips scrunched, hiding his gnarled bottom teeth. His bottom lip was a mottled mess, repaired from once having been split horribly in two.

Delton turned back and put his hands on the man’s shoulder, which had the effect of moving him aside almost effortlessly. “Forgive Augustus. He’s a creature of order, first and foremost, a top man. Very sensitive to the threat of rash and emotionalistic decisions.”

“Yeah,” Lyle said, sizing him up. “He looks very sensitive.”

Augustus growled quietly, his nostrils pouring out heat like an idling tank. Though there was no weapon visible about him, it was impossible not to remember that this beast could crush Lyle like a can. Delton had a sharp eye for many things, it seemed.

“But still, I did promise to get you the best deal I could. I’ll do what I can. In the meantime, do the same. You don’t want to wait till your people are ragged and desperate, because they’ll find their ways and they may not be so good. These things are better done centralized. Orderly.”

With that, Delton disappeared behind the flaps of his earthly palace. Augustus grunted as if to push Lyle away. When Lyle just stood, staring, Augustus walked to the side of the trade tent and sat on top of one of the storage lockers, whipping out a Nintendo DS. A little grin appeared across the giant’s face, until he leered up at Lyle, who finally decided to let himself be warded off.

“Fucking maniacs,” Lyle said beneath his breath. “I hope Xavier’s really grown up. Hope someone’s still sane. How does he let his people run around like this?”

He was still muttering to himself like that when he nearly ran into Laramie in front of Xavier’s tent. It hadn’t occurred to him that the two tents were only a minute walk apart. Though most of the tents in camp were packed in the same fifty foot area, centered around Cook’s tent, it seemed small and huge in turns, squashed or inflated by the wild personalities that wandered through it.

“Bro!” Laramie said, grabbing Lyle by his upper arms familiarly. “You alright bro?”

“Yeah, sure. Is Xavier in?”

Xavier was already emerging from his den, which always had the air of a commander’s tent, with the constant coming and going of the Chads— Xavier’s fingers in the camp— and Spencer and his men, his swords. He couldn’t shake the image of Xavier like a petty prince, at war with the faceless hordes that lay outside his war encampment. But Xavier’s visage was strained and stressed, as if assaulted by a constant bitter wind, and the lines in his face seemed a measure more deeply set that day.

“Lyle, nice to see you.”

“You too. You have a minute?”

Xavier’s eyes shot back to his tent for a fraction of a second, almost imperceptibly. “Of course.”

“I’m speaking for my group, it looks like.”

Xavier grew a small smile and slapped Lyle on the arm, shook his hand, as if welcoming to a club. “I figured it would be you.”

“Really? Why?”

“You have a kind of natural leadership thing going on. Your people look up to you.”

“Huh.” He had never noticed.

“Well, that is good news, more hands are always needed. We make it look easy, but it took a while to develop our little system. Imagine what the food was like before Cook came along, or what little we had before Delton set up shop here? Are your people already working?”

“Most of them. Someone or another grabbed them. They seem to be fitting in well enough.”

“Good, good. We don’t tell you what to do much around here, but everyone’s gotta pitch in. Someone’s gotta watch so we don’t get our throats slit in the middle of the night.”

Lyle gulped. “Yeah, it’s just common sense. Where else does that leave us?”

“Welp...” Xavier looked around, “It’d be a good idea for us to meet once a day, more or less, depending on if something’s happening. My tent’s open to you anytime, anyday, unless the red flag is pinned to the zipper there, see? I call it the stop sign. Think of it like a ‘do not disturb’ hanger on your hotel room door. It’s the only way to get a little privacy around here, with everyone coming to you with every problem. And let me tell you, they’re going to and they won’t stop. They’ll stampede you in the morning because the port o john lines are too long and complain about Delton’s prices for everything, as if I control the guy. They’ll bring every personal dispute and dilemma. And they’ll invade your dreams. You’ll wake up feeling like you had just been in court all night.”

Lyle hoped he was exaggerating, but he could already imagine it, and the imaginary stress already stressed him. “What about living situations? It’s crowded in the medical tent.”

“Have you talked to Delton about more tents?”

“He’s already charging an arm and a leg for clothes. We don’t have nearly enough to trade him for just the basics to start.”

“Work around camp for a few days and you should be able to put enough together, right? Trade services. It’d be good for everyone.”

“We’re in rags. We’re cold in the night and hot half the day. We’re sharing a stick of deodorant between us. You know what that tent smells like when Kenny and Jeffy get their night sweats?”

“We’ve definitely been there.” Xavier hummed thoughtfully. “We’ve got an extra large-sized tent in the emergency supply. I’ll talk to Delton.”

“We’re still short half a dozen toothbrushes, toothpaste, socks and undies and all sorts of clothes in different sizes, extra blankets, meds for toothaches... We’ve got a single 8” x 11” notebook we all use, for shit’s sake. I’m trying to map the danger hotspots around town based on your people’s intel, meanwhile my guys are arguing because one person’s journal is getting read and another person’s doodling over it because we’re out of space.”

Xavier reached into his fanny pack and tossed Lyle a tiny, brand new notebook. “Delton’s got plenty of notebooks, dirt cheap. You can get all the notary you can carry from one loot run, so it’s worth next to nothing. You can get an up-to-date copy of our map of the surrounding area from him too. No reason to reinvent the wheel.”

“Look, I’m not searching for handouts. My people want to go looting. At least just once, so we’re not coming here with nothing. It’ll be nearby, with a small group of our best people, and then we can go from there. There’s got to be plenty of crap left in Pines Farm, the neighborhood next door.”

Xavier scratched his upper lip and put his hands behind his back, suddenly looking like a much older man, a politician pacing and weighing a difficult choice on his hands. “You already talked to them about it?”

“Not yet, but I know they’ll be willing. We’re really hunter-gatherers right now. Everything we have is either from our dead parents or taken from boomers’ empty houses.”

“Hmm, well, I want to say yes...”

“Then tell me yes.”

“...but there’s a lot of factors at play here. Offing the Fire King was a great thing in the grand scheme of things, but the Firestarters all wound up now and have more scouts out than ever. That’s not a guess; the Boogie Boys confirmed it and are still monitoring the situation.”

“So we’re careful.”

“This isn’t the first time we faced off with them either. Sure, we won most of them, especially after Spencer and his boys joined with us, but do you remember Dan Montesorri?”

“More by name, but sure.”

“They got him early on, when there were fewer of us.”

“Damn.” Lyle remembered flashes of this kid he barely knew in highschool. He could barely remember his face, his profile, but somehow they seemed clearer than ever.

“Yeah. They know we’re around here. And the Red Camp is only twenty five minutes down the bike trail. They know they’re around, too, and they’re bigger. The firemen want to be the last left standing. They want to be supreme.”

Lyle was silent. No matter how much the feeling of death and doom filled the air, it was easy to forget that it really had come for so many already, and any day it could be him or one of his own.

“That’s why I gotta ask you to hang tight til we get a better view of things, hopefully things calm down. Consider it a personal favor. I know how tight things are right now, for you all especially, just coming off the streets. But I’ve got all of us to think about, people that have already struggled through the same stuff and are just starting to lay down roots. I don’t want to take that away from them. It’s a lot of bad-fitting puzzle pieces. A lot to weigh out.”

“Damn it.” Lyle was oppressed with images of his friends, cold and hungry and in tattered clothes. But it was better than being dead. They were in it together. “You’re the boss. I’ll hold off for now.”

“For now,” Xavier agreed. “There’s no doubt we’ve got to get off the defensive, but we’re still working it out. We’re in talks with the Reds, but they’re difficult to negotiate with. They want everyone to be like them. They’re similar to the firemen in that way, but they’re not savages. They hate Orwell, who they exiled, but they allow Grace and Penelope to return to them for trade and swapping info. They hate Delton but they trade with him constantly, at least through indirect channels. Delton has his little fingers everywhere, probably in places we don’t even know about, but he doesn’t give up his secrets easily.”

“I don’t like him. There’s something off about him. All he cares about is money, or whatever counts as money in the apocalypse.”

“Can’t live with him, can’t live without him, so we live with him. Ain’t it a bitch?”

Lyle nodded. He wanted to ask where that left them now, again, but he knew that was a question he would have to figure out himself, no matter how much it would suck for his own guys.

“I’m glad we had this talk,” Xavier continued. “See, it’s all working together and compromise. It’s not easy, but we’ve gotten on as well as we could hope so far.”

Just as he said that, Gavin and Diana burst onto the scene. Specifically, a 1.75l bottle of red liquid exploded uncomfortably close to them, littering shards of glass around the neatly flattened grass that was so much like a peaceful carpet a moment before.”

“Guys! Broken glass in front of my tent! Seriously?!”

“Oh, you think that’s bad? The bonds of *love* and *trust* themselves have been dissolved by the strong acids of *perpetual selfishness* and *deceit!*” Diana ranted.

“Oh honey, leave them out of it,” Gavin pleaded.

“No! Everyone should know! Do you know what was in that bottle, Xavier?”

“Your wine?”

“No! Water with food coloring. Isn’t that just *tasty* and *delicious?* I hope everyone’s feeling delicious tonight, because there’s *nothing left* for anyone anymore!.”

Everyone around was indeed feeling something, because Cook, Augustus, Chadwick, and other peeking eyes were all suddenly watching curiously, peeping eyes from behind tents and tent flaps.

“Honey, baby, there’s plenty left. I’m sorry, it’s my fault,” Gavin told her.

“Hey! Give it a break, guys! Go home! You’re drunk!” Xavier shouted, then nudged Lyle. “See what I’m talking about? It’s like clockwork.” It was then that Lyle noticed Diana was wielding what looked like a pint of vodka, flailing around in a drunken rage. When Gavin tried to restrain her, she jerked and pushed and waved and yelled, tossing him aside like a bothersome dog, and it seemed he had all the hapless persistence and supplication of one.

Lyle was annoyed because the calamity was chaotic and wearisome, and because he didn’t feel like his conversation with Xavier was yet done. He marched over to the two and might as well have grabbed them by the ears, for he wrenched them close into a huddle and deflected all the flailing and shouting that passed by his face, and all the noise around.

“Look, he stole a bunch of your booze, right?” he said to Diana.

“Damn right, the whole latest batch! That’s what we live off of— I mean, what I live off of. Filthy bastard. That’s my living he stole!”

“But you’ve got more, right? You’re not ruined.”

“Yes,” she conceded.

“And you,” he turned to Gavin. “You fucked up. You stole her booze without even saying a word.”

“I... yes....”

“And now you’re going to pay her back and make it back and learn from your mistakes, right? You’re going to make it up to her until she says you did.”

“...I’ll try.”

“See!” Diana screamed. “Look at that bastard! He’s lying through his teeth! He’s not going to do shit and he’ll just take it again and lie and cry and sleep all day like he always does.” She started sobbing herself.

“No, he’s not. He realizes how serious this is. This was his cry for help, his way of reaching out to you. He doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want to hurt you.”

Gavin nodded vigorously and choked back tears.

“See? There’s something deeper going on here. This isn’t about wine or fighting or even the past. This is about you guys’ relationship. This is about the things you guys need to say to each other, what you’ve been holding back. And that’s no one’s business but your own. So go figure it out and everything else will fall in line.”

Diana and Gavin looked at each other with serious, sad eyes, staring deep into the dark, watery windows of the soul, when Diana smacked her partner across the cheek so hard that a few gasps were heard. He rubbed his smarting face and embraced her. She accepted it and they stood there for a long minute. Diana pushed him off and went away, the opposite of their tent. Gavin followed.

There was silence in the whole camp, except that Tree Kid said, “Woah!” having appeared suddenly next to Cook’s station in front of his camp, slurping on a bowl of something brown and savory as he too watched on.

“That didn’t go like I expected,” Lyle muttered to himself.

Xavier came over and slapped his upper arm as was becoming customary between them. “That was amazing. man, you were a real philosopher. How’d you do it?”

“Huh?” Lyle looked around and made sure they weren’t there. “Well, they were drunk, codependent and angry. I watched my parents go through that. So get 'em past the angry phase and go right to making up.”

“You know they’re going to go right back at it, though.”

“I figured, but that’s a problem for next time. Will have to use some other trick then. You can help others along, keep the peace, but at the end of the day it’s up to them to change or not.”

“Hmph, ain’t that the truth.” Xavier nodded affirmingly. “Hey, we don’t have a lot of fancy nonsense titles here, but there’s a few key positions, you already noticed. I think you’re deserving of one. You’re a natural mediator, you go between people and fix things. Mediators are our official conflict solvers, so people only come to me if they can’t come to an agreement with a mediator. Sound like something you could help with?”

It was sprung on him all too quickly. The whole idea tasted like orange and chocolate and mint mixed together. He wasn’t sure what to make of it. Yet it seemed somehow appropriate. And it was an opportunity to get more leverage with Xavier and everyone, and get to know his campmates more intimately. He didn’t want to say yes, but he couldn’t say no.

“Of course, why not. How hard could that be?”

Xavier laughed a little too much. “Not easy, but neither is watching people unravel while we’re trying to get by at the end of the world.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The only other mediator right now is Laramie, but all he knows how to do is tell people what they want to hear or what he wants to hear, so that doesn’t solve any serious disagreements. Mike and Spencer have similar authority because they’re the main security guys, but they’re not interested in dealing with spats that don’t involve gunfights, so people are gonna be looking to you. I’ll let everyone know. Just try to keep the peace, that’s all I ask. We’ve got enough to worry about without people ripping off heads over shit like that.” Xavier pointed to the burst wine bottle littering his beautiful grass.

Lyle was already having second doubts, but this was the path he chose. He would be a mediator.

“I’ll see what I can do about basic stuff for your crew. The Boogies are traveling light, not much looting, but I’m sure they can pick up some odds and ends. I really appreciate you helping out. We can get a lot done together.” He shook Lyle’s hand and smiled politician-like.

Lyle accepted it cordially, but he couldn’t tell whether he was winning or losing in this negotiation. Things moved too fast for his taste in this crazy world.

He watched Xavier squat down and disappear into his tent. He left the strip of blaze red tape hanging on the flip, his ‘do not disturb’ sign.

Lyle looked around. He had nothing to show for his people. They couldn’t go looting, and he’d just taken on counseling responsibilities for a bunch of people he barely knew.

It was probably a good idea to go talk with some of them, get started on developing bonds and the trust he’d need to produce results.

Instead he went for a walk to clear his head.

### 19 - Food for thought

Jeffy felt disheartened after his encounter with the boy in the tree and his aborted attempt to climb up there with him. He thought he’d be happy if he could make it up to the high branches where the birds and squirrels lived, but that turned into horror and confusion halfway up. He barely made it down alive.

Then he thought he would be happy down here with the people, but it was just as lonely and pointless. No one wanted to talk with him, and when they did, he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to them. Everyone was either busy or missing. He passed by his brother who was coming back from a hunt with Michael with two dead rabbits tied to a tree branch over his shoulder, smiling proudly.

“Good job!” he told his brother, but Kenny snubbed him:

“Go away. Mike’s gonna teach me how to skin 'em. I’m gonna make a hat to start, then I’m gonna make a whole suit out of rabbits. That’ll be sick, huh?” And with that, he walked away. Kenny was horrible like that.

He missed it when it was just them in the house. Sure, it was dreadfully boring and they fought a lot, but at least he paid attention. They did everything together. He knew things were gonna be tough out here, but he was expecting an adventure, even nails-and-teeth survival, not suddenly getting abandoned.

His brush with death by immolation with the Fire King still hung over his head, like a little candle flame in the back of his mind that never went out, always burning if he wasn’t distracting himself. When he was really alone and caught in his thoughts, the flame would grow and grow until his head ached and his body was full of terrifying heat like he was burning alive.

He started to sweat, stumbling through the center of the camp. All the tents and people seemed distant and yet they were closing in on him. His heart was thumping in his ears. His skin was cold and clammy. Everything was foreign and hostile and terrifying.

Then he noticed Jerry sitting at Cook’s tent and it distracted him just a little. His legs took him over. There was a sweet, relaxing fragrance as always, pork roasting, corn and beans simmering in saucepans resting around the edges of the firepit.

“What’re you doing, Jerry?”

“Jerry is doing his part,” he answered, slowly opening another can of corn and placing it down.

Just then, Cook came out of his tent with some vegetable oil and spices. “Howdy, little man. Ah, you don’t look so good. Must need some homestyle cooking.”

Jeffy was tired of being reminded he was small, vulnerable, miserable and hungry, (though his appetite was broken.) But it was all true.

“Pull up a seat, grab a little warmth.”

Jeffy put a wobbly little beechwood stool by the fire and sat, hunching over by the weight of the quiet turmoil in his heart and head. He was cold, but the fire in front of him was more tormenting than comforting.

“Coffee?” Cook offered, swishing a small saucepan full of black liquid. “Think I got a packet of hot chocolate left too. Warms the soul.”

Jeffy didn’t want to impose, so he nodded to the coffee. Cook poured him a cup, mixing in some dry creamer from a big container and a generous dab of honey from a bottle.

“I’d normally ask you how you take it, but try it my way this one time. You might like it.”

Jeffy took a tiny sip, running it through his front teeth so it didn’t burn him. He was surprised; it was delicious and sweet and the temperature was just right.

“It’s so good!”

“That’s Cook’s special way. Not easy to come by honey, of course, but I keep a little to sweeten up some recipes, and for private use.” He winked. “Wild clover honey. Real good for the immune system, colds, flus, everything. Don’t wanna be getting the ‘rona nowadays. Who knows what it would do to us, even if we’re still young?”

Jeffy dropped his head.

“What’s got ya down, little buddy?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel right the last few days.”

“Well, can’t blame ya. These are *un-presidented* times. Haha, get it, un-presidented?”

Jeffy shrugged, then noticed Jerry was shucking corn. As usual, he was meticulous, exact, careful, and utterly slow and inefficient.

“You got corn?” Jeffy exclaimed.

“A-yup, Delton’s contribution. Don’t know how he does it, but he has his ways. Wonder if he could land some fresh lobster. Wouldn’t that be something?”

Jeffy just watched Jerry shuck. It was simple and relaxing.

“You know, there’s plenty more if you feel like helping,” Cook said. He picked an ear of corn up and tossed it over.

Jeffy looked at it for a second, then slowly started peeling away the papery green husks, the tufts of string, revealing the golden treasure underneath. A little smile came to his face. It was like he was unraveling his problems.

“Some people don’t like it fresh on the cob... crazy people... so I cut it off the cobs for ‘em, or mash and boil it to make sweet corn if they like it that way,” Cook explained.

“You seem to care a lot about people,” Jeffy said, getting to the end of shucking, wondering if he should go through the trouble of removing all the strings like his mom used to tell him.

“Being kind is something everyone can do, so I don’t see why anyone wouldn’t. Doesn’t cost anything. I just think about what Jesus would do.”

“Jesus? Like God?”

“Ah... pretty much. Both God and son of God. My parents raised me Christian. I shudder to think what I’d be like without Christ having my back.”

Jeffy thought back. “I went to CCD sometimes when I was a kid.”

“That’s kinda like Sunday School, right? Didn’t it make you feel good hearing stories about miracles and stuff? Getting good lessons on life?”

Jeffy shrugged. “It was pretty boring.”

“Oh, well... Now you’re out here making your own decisions, making your own stories, and you gotta choose what kind of person you’re gonna be. Good or bad. Working for others or only for yourself, all that.”

Jeffy looked at the shiny ear of corn in his hand. He decided to pick off each string. Maybe someone would appreciate that later. He noticed Jerry, for all his inefficiency, had done the same. They each picked up another and kept shucking.

“Thanks, fellahs. It’s gonna be good eatin’ for everyone today ‘cause of your help.”

“Jerry likes to help,” Jerry said, focusing on the task. “The corn must be helped.”

“Now... people like it different ways...” Cook knelt by the fire and pulled two ears of corn that had been resting over it, skewed on camping pokers, “but I like it the *best* way, cooked in the husk over an open fire.” He carefully peeled it off, revealing the steaming yellow delicacy underneath.

Jeffy salivated at the sweet smell, but as he looked at the fire, all those fears poured back in his head and his core. Flames, Fire King... fire in his head... fire everywhere.

Then he noticed Jerry delicately skewering an ear and placing it over the fire. If Jerry could do it, maybe...

The real or imagined gasoline smells slowly faded away with the smells of good dining. Jeffy put his own corn over the fire and before long, took it off and ate it. He was no longer even afraid of bursting into flames. They cooked and ate with laughs and smiles.

### 20 - Stress

"I can't believe it's only been a week, and look where we are," Kimmy said. She was garbed in a beautiful velvet red dress, with her hair twisted up into a fanciful mess of her usual thin braids, now woven into delightful, intricate patterns that shined ornately in the golden-red light of dusk. The night was warm and welcoming, and a cigar they all shared billowed its gentle snaketail trails of smoke toward a sky that looked like simmering spiced wine and good sleep.

"We did good," Beckett said in a stunning black tuxedo, puffing the cigar and looking at camp, which was peaceful and lively with people going here and there, or lounging in front of their tents. Somehow everyone had someone to hold onto. Jace and Beckett were each holding onto Kimmy together. "We're finally safe here. We can live our lives and rebuild the world into a better place. We don’t have to be scared anymore." He passed the cigar kindly onto Jace.

"No, Lyle did good." Jace took a deep puff of smoke and sighed comfortably. He wore a grey suit jacket rolled up his forearms, his hair cut short and prim, his face washed and clean. His friendly eyes shimmered, and his once-eternal smile had returned. "If it wasn't for Lyle, we wouldn't be here."

Beckett nodded. "You're totally right."

They all chattered in agreement and clapped softly at first, then in genuine applause. The whole camp appeared behind them and broke out in cheering. You could vaguely make out everyone's faces. They looked at Lyle in total appreciation.

"Me? What did I do?" he asked them.

Their faces twisted into grotesque frowns and masks of terror in unison. Suddenly the sky was black and cold. It thundered and rained and the clamor of far-off gunshots transformed in moments to the sounds of bullets splintering wood and ricochets wailing off stone. Lightning struck the center of camp again and again, and tents were aflame, charred bodies thrown and scattered all over, mangled or moaning for help.

"My God!" Lyle screamed in his head, for suddenly his voice was squelched, and he ripped at his face for where his mouth would be, horrified to find there was none. He dug his nails in, trying to tear open a hole, but only sloughing strips of skin off.

"You were supposed to save us. You were the voice of reason, but you let us down," his three friends accused him. "You let us die."

He tried to respond to them through the muffles of his jaw and mouth encased in skin, through thoughts blaring from his mind: *"I didn't know what to do! I never wanted this! I'm just a kid! I'm just a kid!"* but his nose had disappeared too, and though he struggled to rip through to his airways or even his skull, to suck air through his ears or his eyes, he soon tingled and grew numb and heavy, falling airless to his knees, just as dozens of raiders overran their camp, shooting corpses as they went, howling and bellowing the ancient sounds of men-become-monsters at war.

A tall figure made of black smoke and shadows approached with a thick steel revolver in his hand that shined in the night fires, and kicked Kimmy’s legs out from beneath her. She slammed to the ground with a cry.

He aimed and shot her in the head twice, filling the air with red mist and gun smoke. Her skull deformed more into a misshapen mess with each shot, eyes bulging out of the sockets, blood instantly oozing from the mouth and ears and nose. Beckett and Jace screamed their souls out and were shot too, collapsing to the ground, gasping for air as the world spun around in a torrent of chaos.

The shadow monster came to Lyle, the creatures’ smoky form somehow stained with blood and misery and pain. Its face almost became a smile. Lyle squirmed and tried in vain to cry out, suffocating, wishing his eyes could be taken away.

But the monster pulled up its mask, revealing a scarred-up white face. It looked at first like Xavier, then Spencer, then nearly everyone he knew, then no one in particular. It grinned so widely that the sides of its cheek tore, its face split in two, peeling away from the bloody skull with a grotesque sundering flesh sound. It pushed the gun into his forehead, pulled back the hammer with a heavy, echoing click...

Lyle woke up screaming, sitting up from his sleeping bag. He saw his friends all about the floor of the tent with him, and though it was pitch black, he could see them faintly, cast in dim red moonlight.

Why didn't they wake, though? Couldn't they hear him?

It was then that he realized the floor was wet— no, covered in inches of water. It must have flooded in the night, but...

It was warm... The iron smell...

They were all dead! Killed in the middle of the night, all his friends scattered in a pool of their blood!

He screamed for God. But his mouth was gone again.

The tent door opened, letting in the scantest of early morning light, a figure silhouetted in the doorway.

Lyle was sitting up, his rifle trained on the intruder, his thumb fumbling to disengage the block-shaped safety button. He tried to breathe but his chest was full of concrete. His mouth and nose must have still been stolen away by unknown forces.

"Lyle. Lyle! It's me," a hushed voice said. He recognized it.

"Beckett...?" his voice barely squeaked out, after a few tries.

A glow stick broke, revealing Beckett's face cast in yellowish-green.

Lyle finally started drawing in breath. He felt his face with his left hand, and was surprised to find it all there. He looked around the floor and they were all there, but he saw rising and lowering chests, and heard familiar rasping snores. There was no pool of blood under them, only the cold sweat he had drenched himself and his bag in. He slowly lowered his weapon, pushed the safety on.

Beckett came over, crouched low, breathing heavily. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I thought... I couldn't breathe... You were all dead...” He felt his throat. It was sore. Oh god. Was he getting sick?

"Looks like you had a night terror, guy. I told you I don't like you sleeping with that gun on your chest."

Lyle looked at the gun in his lap. “This way it’s ready if we get snuck up on.”

He remembered everyone else had their guns either next to them while they slept, or piled in two or three spots collectively. He had warned them that they would be grabbing each other’s guns in any chaos, but those who weren’t comfortable cuddling their weapons to bed had nowhere else to place them, given the tight conditions and other piles of junk.

“Yeah, ready to shoot one of us cause you’re having a bad dream.”

Lyle crawled out of his wet sleeping bag and the stale sweat on him was assaulted by cold air, making him shiver and feel ill. “Where are you going?”

“Taking watch. It’s my shift.”

“I’m coming with you.” Lyle got up, disgusted and cold. He tossed off his shirt into the corner and rustled for the only other clean shirt he had, a scratchy blue flannel with white and grey lines.

“I dunno man, I don’t want you shooting at the shadows on my watch and getting me knocked down to lunch lady.”

“I’m fine.”

“Good morning to you guys too,” Kimmy spoke up, yawning and wiping her eyes. “‘Nother day in paradise.”

“Hey, what time is it?” Jeffy whined.

“It is 5:31 AM,” Jerry informed them.

“Oh man, I’m late!” Kenny said, throwing on a pair of oversized camo hunting pants that Mike had given him and running out the door with his Bay State Arms break barrel 16 gauge shotgun, manufactured proudly in neighboring Massachusetts, but specifically less proudly in Worcester.

“At least he’s happy,” Kimmy noted. “It’s freezing in here, Lyle. Why did we ever trade our gloves and hats and stuff to that cheapskate Delton?”

Lyle growled. “I didn’t know there was gonna be a cold snap less than a week later. We needed toilet paper to shit with, new socks and underwear.”

“It still smells like shit in here.” And she was right. “I’d rather wipe my ass with leaves than shiver all night. I feel like I barely got any sleep.”

A few other voices agreed.

Lyle started counting on his fingers. “I got what I could from Xavier’s private reserve for the camp. I told you guys to trade and work for your stuff...”

“We already did. We already do. Why haven’t we gone looting? There’s nothing new coming into camp that isn’t running through Delton’s shop, at least not that anyone’s sharing.”

“I’m working on it,” Lyle said, annoyed. “We’re guests in this camp. If Xavier says he doesn’t want us looting and getting the whole camp found out, what am I supposed to do about it?”

“Well, we gotta do something.”

“I’m working on it,” Lyle repeated. He marched out past Beckett, who shrugged and followed.

There was silence and Kimmy sighed. “I don’t know what to do with him. We can’t just sit here cold and starving doing nothing.”

“We’re not starving,” Jeffy told her. “We’re having slow-roasted pigeon with turnip greens and vinaigrette for lunch... I think I’m going to make some coffee and start early.” He sounded tired but determined. “You in, Jerry?”

Jerry folded up his little notebook and put it away in his pocket. “Jerry is glad to help.” And they moseyed out together, shutting the flap behind them.

With that, it was just Kimmy and Jace, lying a body’s length apart in the big central room of the tent, looking at each other silently. Jace pulled his backpack behind his head so he could sit up on it like a pile of pillows. He pulled the quilted blanket up to his chin timidly. Kimmy lied on her side and looked at him, suddenly feeling a bit warmer, and wanting to warm up more than that. Something animal was taking over. She knew it, she liked it, but she was never good with words when she was like this.

“Really is cold and stinky in here,” she said and immediately felt like an idiot.

“Yeah, it’s bad.”

“Kind of lonely too... wish I had some kind of distraction.”

“Yeah...” Jace felt like he had to say something too. “Wish I could get a Nintendo like that big guy has.”

“Augustus? He looks so big and goofy. I wonder if he knows how to play it or if he just taps on the keys.”

“Yeah...”

Kimmy could tell something was wrong, but she was resolved to make something happen. He was probably just nervous. Jace was sweet like that. Boyish or manly at just the right times for her... usually. She crawled toward him furtively, the thin pajama pants she wore to bed falling off her sensually. Oh yeah, I’m doing it, she thought.

As soon as Jace noticed her close, he rolled away and onto his knees, stuffing random things into his bag, putting his hat on inside out, doing everything he could to look busy. Some cigarettes fell out of his bag and started trying to spark it up with a Chinese knock-off Zippo-style lighter that he didn’t realize had no fuel.

“What’re you doing?” she half-chuckled.

“Just, uh, sparkin’ one up, you know?”

“No, I don’t,” she laughed. “You don’t smoke.”

“Well, I’m just starting up.”

She just sat silently with her chin held in her hand, lip curled, eyes heavy and shining in the dimness. He looked her way uncontrollably, and there she was, flustering him entirely, a rock dropping in his stomach. Her long legs stretched, bare but for the thin, faded green panties outlining her soft, shapely ass, hugging her small but full hips. One foot hung girlishly in the air with a little sock hanging on her toes. Each fumbling spark of his lighter lit her up a little, like a dark succubus staring at you in your own bedroom. Inescapable, insatiable, irresistible.

She glided up beside him with a movement so smooth that one would have sworn she was underwater, producing a yellow Bic from her bright red bra. His face grew hot and felt strange from belt to boot. Her new bra was two sizes too big for her and so betrayed her small, perky breasts underneath, the gentle rib bumps of her skinny chest, the softness of her whole immaculate skin. If she turned just a little in the right way, he would see everything...

“Let me help you,” she said, sparking her lighter. The little flame, seeming so great so close to them, lit up all the truth of her burning, searching eyes, her supple, pouting lips, her mouth just ajar, soft, ready to take him away from this world for a little while...

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“So I screwed it up,” Jace told Lyle.

“You sure did,” his friend agreed matter-of-factly. “I mean, shit, if I were in that situation, I would’ve, phew...”

Jace looked at his friend with perhaps the closest thing to anger Lyle had seen since he’d broken one of his favorite toys a decade ago. There was something truly fearful about Jace when he made that face, like it was a face that didn’t belong in this reality.

“I mean, in similar circumstances with someone totally different, obviously,” Lyle saved himself.

“Oh my God, what am I doing? I’m an idiot. Total idiot!”

“Easy buddy. It’s not the end of the world.” Lyle stopped, looked around and remembered it was, in fact, the end of the world all around them. This made him hate himself too. “Now what did you tell her when you left?”

“That I needed to go have a cigarette.”

“No, after that,” Lyle said. “Before you ran until you forgot everything, until you forgot you weren’t a bird and ran to the top of a tree.”

They both looked down. They were two hundred feet up in a tree, looking down on Tree Kid, who waved up at them and shouted, “Keep going, guys!” since he could hear everything they were saying.

“Now I came up here for you, you gotta talk to me,” Lyle reminded him.

“I told her I knew she liked Beckett and I couldn’t do that to either of them. Then I left.”

“And ran to the top of a tree,” Lyle sighed.

“Ly, she’s Beckett’s girl. I’m just not that kind of guy!”

“Okay, okay. First, Kimmy’s no one’s girl. She’s her own girl. I figured you of all people would have noticed. Second, who cares about all this and that crap? Kimmy can make her own decisions and, man, at that moment you were her choice. You’re like... the Falcons in that Super Bowl a few years back. You had the big game handed to you. All you had to do was nothing... and you blew it.”

"What? No!"

"We got enough trouble with one of you running around. Imagine two!" Lyle slapped his friend lightly, but it was still enough to remind them they were about two hundred feet from the ground. He started climbing down. "So you stay up here however long you need. But come down soon. If you faint or slip you'll go splat. And when you get down there, use your communication skills and make it right."

Lyle was already six feet farther down the tree as he spoke. He couldn't get down there fast enough, except he didn't want to do it at terminal velocity.

He climbed down near Tree Kid, who was sitting there looking more lively than usual. He could see now that Tree Kid's camo cap hid a mess of dirty blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes set in a dirty face, and looked much like the child he actually was. "You guys are crazy," he said.

"You sit up in this tree all day," Lyle noted.

"Yeah. But you guys went up higher than me. That’s psycho.”

"What's your name, anyway?"

"They call me Ozy. I see the stretching sands over the barren lands..."

Lyle had no patience for stretching sands or more barren lands. "No, I mean your real name. Before all this."

Ozy had to think for a moment. "Ozzy. With two Z's."

"Why are you really up here all day? Your bones must hurt, your back must be killing you."

Ozy contemplated.

"Keep your secrets then," Lyle said, tired and woozy and wanting to get back down to earth. He kept climbing down and Ozy sighed, pulling out a small paperback from his jacket.

*"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,*

*There is a rapture on the lonely shore,*

*There is society, where none intrudes,*

*By the deep sea, and music in its roar:*

*I love not man the less, but Nature more."*

Lyle was getting excited just by being reminded that sex existed— or at least could exist— but it evaporated just as quickly by second hand embarrassment.

“I’m just not that kind of guy,” Jace lamented.

"Look, I'm not telling you to cuck Beckett while he sits in a corner. I'd just find out where they stand before you go around... worrying so much." Of course, he wanted to say ‘Before you go around not having sex with her.’

"I can't talk to her now..."

"Well, you have to at some point. Awkwardness isn't a luxury we can afford." Lyle looked at his friend. "And neither is pregnancy, so don't be an idiot!”

### 21 - Market pressures

Kimmy was standing by the open door of the group tent smoking a stale Virginia Slim in her red plaid pajama pants and dusty black Northface jacket when Lyle came, hoping to catch a half hour of rest while nothing was going on. Of course, there would be no such luck today.

“Taking up smoking?” he asked.

That phrasing triggered her, the scene with Jace fresh in her mind. She tossed it to the ground and nearly stamped it out before Lyle flew to his knees to grab it, carefully putting it out and twisting the end.

“Look at us, scrounging for scraps,” Kimmy lamented.

“What’s wrong?” He wanted it to seem like he knew there was something wrong purely from the sound of her voice, but she was too sharp for that.

“Your friend’s an idiot.”

“Ah, yeah,” he scratched his neck. “What can I say? He’s got a lot of strengths and dealing with... things like that isn’t one of them.”

“It’s not like I made it difficult.” She kept spitting, trying to get the tobacco taste out of her mouth. She hated cigarettes. How could she forget?

Lyle wanted to say, ‘I know, I heard,’ but instead just nodded understandingly.

“He’s cute, but I... I don’t know. I just wanted something that wasn’t so confusing. It ain’t easy out here, you know? Hasn’t been an ounce of normal stuff for a long time.”

Lyle took a deep breath. “You’re telling me.”

She got closer to him, took hold of her half-smoked cigarette in Lyle’s hand. “Too many choices for a girl to make.” She flashed her eyes up at him, and froze him there.

Lyle’s knees and resolve started shaking a little. He felt heat and cold passing through him all over. Suddenly she twisted him into a tight headlock and gave him the noogie of a lifetime, grinding her knuckles into his scalp. Nothing had prepared him for this sudden turn of events, and it seemed almost an appropriate end when she launched him twirling to the ground. He got up slowly, confused and intrigued.

“Thought you were gonna pull a sneaky on me?” she smirked, hands on her hips.

All such thoughts instantly evaporated as if they had never existed. “Of course not!”

“Good. I’m a warrior princess, not a camp follower. Got a reputation to keep.”

Lyle had the oddest hallucination of her coming over, kicking him down and standing on his chest with one boot, looking down on him with those fierce eyes. When he shook that vision away, all was normal again. She helped him up and put the burnt cigarette in her pocket.

“That’s gonna smell like shit,” she sighed.

“Yeah, but who knows, anything could be worth something out here.”

She picked up her AR-15 that was lying on the ground next to her. “Wonder what Delton would give me for this. Probably all the stuff we all need.”

“You can’t sell that gun, it’s the only good semi-auto our group has!”

“Besides yours.”

“We’re not going by gun shop prices anymore. If something breaks on my AUG, no one’s going to have replacement parts, but yours, it’s the most common gun in America. And you can make it automatic with just a piece of coat hanger. Spencer’s boys know how. If they showed me how they did it on an AR, maybe I could do it with mine, I don’t know.”

“What about equity? Just take out a little loan on it till we’re in a better place financially?”

“Delton offered you that too?” His mouth filled up with saliva he wanted to launch on Delton and his snakish, predatory, capitalistic ways. “No way. I mean, I can’t stop you, but I wouldn’t make any kind of deal like that. He’ll wrap you up in some contract like a used car salesman, shift the goalposts over time, and before you know it that big boy Augustus will be coming to repo all your shit.”

Kimmy kicked the dirt around her feet lightly. “What if I kinda already did...?”

“You... damn... What did you do?”

“Took out 10% on this gun... I got some clothes, sunglasses, mints, dry shampoo, hair elastics... and tampons and Midol...”

Lyle sighed and smacked his head, but he guessed he understood.

“I got a little something for everyone, too! I wasn’t just thinking about myself. I got some shotgun shells for Beckett and Kenny, spices Jeffy needed, a new notebook for Jerry...”

“What did you get for Jace?”

Kimmy blushed and ignored the question. “I got this for you.” She handed him a black flashlight. The button was glow-in-the-dark green and the end was shaped like a crown with sharpish, square edges that could do some damage. “It’s a tactical flashlight. It has a strobe mode and an SOS mode, I guess? Dunno if you’d ever need that. The light’s adjustable and super bright. It’ll blind the hell out of someone at night.”

“I had one just like it, but I lost it somewhere back home.” Lyle was already testing the light by aiming the light toward his eye. “The batteries are almost dead.”

“Yeah, they came like that.” Her lips dropped sadly. “I just wanted some basics. Guess he got me.”

“No, screw that. I’m going to him right now.”

“Lyle, come on, it’s my fault.”

He wasn’t hearing it. Since Delton’s tent was barely thirty feet away, Lyle was still plenty hot-headed when he got there. Kimmy was just behind, feeling embarrassed and timid.

Delton chewed on a crunchy pickle, his eyes scanning steadily through a dogeared copy of *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, savoring each line and each bite. He sipped on pickle juice from a clear plastic container with a faded label, sitting on top of his large white cooler full of valuables unknown like some kind of pirate captain masquerading as a nobleman. He wore his usual knit dark grey sweater, blue jeans, and a pair of thin black leather gloves lined and trimmed with rabbit fur. His scarf and hat were knit-black and cozy-looking.

“You shyster!” Lyle accused, marching right up to him. “Ten percent of a sparkling new AR for a handful of crap you could get at CVS!”

Delton closed the book calmly and put it beside him. “Plus a negligible compounding daily interest rate. CVSs are closed, my friend, but I am not.”

Lyle looked back at Kimmy annoyedly. She shrugged.

“She’s merely borrowing against what she has. It's not as if I intend to cut off a tenth of the gun to put in my pocket. Besides, guns aren’t as valuable as you might think. We’ve got lots of them and so little of everything else we need. Think of how many weapons there are around. Now think how many steaming plates of bacon-wrapped filet mignons. You see my point?”

“The point is, you were supposed to be negotiating with me alone, so I could get the bare basics for my crew!”

“And you failed in that. Your people are in rags. Can you blame them for coming to me themselves? For not wanting to share the communal deodorant?”

Lyle gasped. Kimmy *did* smell suspiciously of rosemary and lavender.

“I can’t control market pressures. I can only do my best to respond to demand. My dealings are fair and consensual, unlike the cruel violence of nature. Blame God or science, not me.”

Lyle started to calm down a little, but became suspicious of Delton’s attempt at defusal, which made him agitated again. And Delton’s mouth working that pickle continuously... crunching and biting and sucking the sour juices out like some kind of vampiric creature... It was maddening.

“Stop that!” Lyle snapped.

Delton took the butt of the pickle out of his mouth and squeezed it between his middle finger and thumb, watching the juice run down the fine texture of his silky, leather-clad hand.

“Would you like one?”

Lyle loved pickles, but he wouldn’t dare to look weak here. “Where do you even get those?”

“I make them. I trade for them. I find them. What difference does it make? They’re real.” He looked up cockeyed, his dark irises nearly hidden by dark strands of wavy hair, the pickle in his mouth something like a cigar representing class and prestige.

“Make them? Where on earth would you find cucumbers in spring? Or pickles that haven’t gone bad?”

“You ask a lot of questions. I have one for you: Are you just jealous, or does some part of you want me reduced to your poverty? I sense an inane moralizer in you, the type who’d burn the world to the ground if it meant everyone had equal rights to the ashes. You know, with all respect, it’s those types of people that made this whole mess, this so-called end of the world.”

“You don’t even know me, dude. And for what it’s worth, people like you caused this. Countries stayed open so businesses wouldn’t suffer. Corporate profits, government lies, all that.”

“Aha, you think so, but the people that create the economy love nothing more than a nice, calm status quo. Why do you think we’d want death, bloodshed, the chaos of a full blown civil war? The loss of an entire generation of better people than us?” Delton examined his pickle thoughtfully.

“Greedy bastards do it. They always do it.”

“Spoken like a true Steven Colbert fan. But the people that make the money and make the peace just wanted to live in peace and make more money. It’s cloudy-headed idealists that screamed and shouted and chomped at the bit to shoot each other at the first opportunity. Minorities didn’t have it good enough, whites didn't have it good enough, the poor didn’t have it good enough, workers didn’t... Give me a break!”

“Of course they didn’t have it good enough. Everyone wants to improve their own lives and everyone else’s... no one wanted *this.*”

“Clearly people *did* want this, so here we are.” He crunched loudly and savored the bite. “But me and my pickles will make the best of it. And my digital watches, my ammunition, my batteries, my cellphones, my floss and my brushes and my toothpaste— the things people need to feel happy. Tell me, do you feel happy?”

Lyle prickled at the question and seethed. “You miss the whole world around you, dude. It’s all *things* to you.”

“You’re the one who asked about my pickles.”

“Only because you’re so obsessed with them! And all the stuff you peddle!”

Delton sighed. “If you’re not occupied with things, you’re obsessed with yourself, and that’s even worse. Vanity isn’t a pretty look on anyone. It’s one of the cardinal sins, you know..”

“Why wouldn’t I worry about other people?!”

“God, that’s the worst idea. Do you even listen to yourself? There’s nothing more insufferable than the types always sticking themselves in everyone else’s business. Busybodies, buzzing little bugs, lives revolving around what’s happening with everyone else. Be glad Instagram is gone. You know, it makes me sick, seeing how people miss it, Facebook and all of that. That’s one of the silver linings of the collapse. We can focus on the real world again.”

“What about helping people? We should be looking outward, you know? Good vibes and all that. Positive energy. Good will towards men.” Lyle knew how weak his argument was beginning to sound.

“You’re just full of original concepts, aren’t you? That’s the same goddamn thing. Benevolence... What's the word?... beneficence?... Altruism, that’s what I’m looking for. Altruism is a cruel joke, a sham. It's an obsession with the *idea* of helping people. That’s the worst kind of busybody. They actually fool themselves into thinking they’re the humble saviors of mankind.”

“I don’t think nihilist even fits you, Delton. You’re a cynic, an ugly cynic. It’s all big words dressing up horrible ideas.”

“No, the difference between me and you is realism. It's tried and true. When people try to live a life dedicated to helping others, at best that help is brief and incidental, a drop in an ocean of egotism. Hedonism is at least more honest, but it’s destructive and antisocial. Ugly, as you put it. A life dedicated to work and things makes sense."

"What about art, love...?"

"All in their place, my friend, but labor is man’s nature. We dump our effort into working in the beautifully quantifiable qualifiable world God put around us, and even if a lot of it is wasted, all that self-minded work helps more strangers than all the philanthropists in the world combined. Did you ever notice that for every charity worker there’s a thousand paid jobs? It’s because one of them works, and the other is trying to impose its idealistic swill on the world. It’s like communism or religion.”

“You don’t even make sense. You mention God then shit on religion in the next breath.”

“Everything has its place. You’ll learn.”

"Come on." Kimmy grabbed Lyle's shoulder. "We can figure it out later."

"No, what about this stupid debt?" Lyle pointed at Delton. "This huckster's wrapping his dragon talons around your balls. He just wants your gun. He'd wear our skins as coats if they had value on the market, if they had *excellent insulating properties.*"

Delton scoffed and smiled devilishly. "Human skin is far too thin."

Kimmy dragged Lyle away. He wanted to bash Delton’s head in but knew he wouldn't, and worse, he knew they all knew he wouldn't, which was almost infuriating enough to make him actually do it, which he definitely had the courage to do, but definitely had the sense not to do.

"Bring me back something with value. A man must be worth his salt," Delton bid them farewell, sitting back down to his book.

"So he goes after my manhood," Lyle complains. "See? He's an asshole. He likes lording himself over people with his mounds of junk."

"Oh... God... No! Not your manhood!" Kimmy mocked. "Wish I was gay like those other two bitches so I could leave you weird dudes to sulk like you always do.”

Lyle seemed to forget all about Delton and everything. "There's gay girls here?"

"See? You're all disgusting."

"Can't live with us, can't live without us." But Lyle remembered that the saying was usually about women.

"We're trapped in a sweaty tent that smells like rotten socks. I swear I'll be asexual before the end of this."

"That wouldn't be good for our mutual friend."

Kimmy went silent.

"Come on, I was just getting in a better mood," Lyle chided, punching her shoulder playfully.

"I know... It's just..." Kimmy puffed out and looked up to the sky. "I don't know what I want. A girl's got a lot of options. And shit changes day to day. Who knows what'll happen?"

Lyle stopped there in the center of camp and she did too.

"Look, you're totally right, Kimmy. You're pretty and it's the end of the world. I'm not gonna blame you for whatever you do. But if you're looking for a good guy who's obviously all about you, all for you, worships the ground you walk on...”

She perked up.

“I mean, I knew the guy when we were kids... We didn't talk for years and we met up less than two weeks ago and it was like nothing changed. He's all loyalty. He's a goofball but... Just, whatever you do, don't play games. For both your sakes."

She looked down.

"Don't break a good heart... They're not gonna be easy to come by out here."

"Okay, I get it," she waved him off.

"Someone talking about good hearts?" An unfamiliar, disembodied voice turned into one of Spencer's comrades, clothed in tactical black as always. His dark mask had a white skull that covered half of his face, which he pulled down to reveal the human beneath. A dark-eyed kid with a long thin nose and lips that always looked like he'd just been punched in the face but smiled at it. He took off the black bandanna tied around his head to reveal dyed blue hair, buzzed neatly on the sides with some length on top.

"Luco, right?" Kimmy asked him, still caught off guard. They'd only seen him once or twice. The Boogie Boys stuck to themselves mostly. “Where do you get a ‘doo like that?”

“Do it myself, like most things...”

Kimmy’s shoulders drooped. Hairstyling seemed like the only thing she had left anymore, and here was a boy cutting and dying his own hair. “Damn...” she muttered under her breath.

He had four beautiful game birds hanging from his backpack in a sad bundle. Their feathers were dark and iridescent, their necks each ringed with a distinct necklace of white. Their eyes were solemnly closed, while he looked smug and satisfied. He smacked his kills. "These boys have good hearts in them. Wanna try one?"

There was something unappetizing about seeing the birds hanging there intact, looking like they were just asleep.

"We're good," she said, assuming Lyle wouldn't want to try any pheasant hearts either.

"You sure?" Luco took a small, medieval-looking leather bag out of a pouch on his military style vest. It was tied shut with black string. "Salted hearts. Pheasant, quail, rabbit, whatever. I have one everyday— and every time I get a kill."

"That math doesn’t work. Wouldn't you run out quickly?" Lyle asked.

Luco laughed and put his pouch away. "Looks like you guys need some help. Rob a few houses and you'll be looking a lot better." He seemed to be examining their dirty clothes. Lyle especially needed to be washed down with a fire hose to get the grime off, but he imagined if there were any fire hoses left in town, the Firestarters would have them spitting flames by now. A lukewarm bath or shower would be like Heaven.

"We wanna wait til things calm down outside."

"You wanna, or the big man wants you to?" Luco looked knowingly to the skyline, as if aware that the whole world outside camp had become a foggy, dangerous unknown again to Lyle and many of his friends. "It's not dying down out there anytime soon."

Kimmy and Lyle both felt deflated.

"Now if you came out with me, we could bring back as much as you can carry."

"I don't want to disrespect Xavier," Lyle fought the temptation.

"What about your people?" Luco reminded him. "We're already going out day and night without being seen. What difference does it make to Xavier if he doesn’t know?"

"I know, but you guys are good at staying hidden. We're just..." He looked over Kimmy and himself and shrugged.

"Sure, sure, you're new to the game, but you're killers in the making. Don't think we didn't hear about you guys' stories. Word passes around. You're survivors." He nodded to their semi-automatic weapons, which put them a grade above most others, even if they didn't feel very confident using them.

"Look, I appreciate it, but I don't wanna make things harder for Xavier and what he's trying to do here. I can tell he's over stressed as is."

"Oh, shit on that, he won't even notice you're gone." Luco leaned in and said a little quietly, "Xavier's a good guy. But he takes too long to move. Doesn't make the decisions that gotta be made fast. And besides that, he's got girl troubles."

"Rachel?" Lyle thought aloud.

"Shhh. I'm not trying to embarrass the guy. The ears have walls and shit." It was then Lyle remembered that the headset Luco had on likely let him hear superhumanly. It was always a disturbing reminder, these mysterious near-strangers that came and went around camp in their perfect gear with perfect training, part of camp but separate, in a class of their own. And here he was offering to help them.

"Well, up to you,” Luco yawned. “Was only going ten or fifteen minutes away, into the neighborhood. Call it a casual stroll. I'll tell you, half those houses are untouched." He gave a two fingered salute, smiled his wolfish grin, and walked over to deliver his bundle of dead pheasants to Cook, who took them happily and started tearing them apart with gruesome crunches, ripped skin and torn-out feathers.

Kimmy ran to Lyle's shoulder. "I wanna go with him. We need this."

"I know, but Xavier took us in, we should listen to his rules." Lyle had never looked a gift horse in the mouth so resolutely.

Then they noticed Jeffy walking with a pot of water toward Cook's tent. His jeans were so torn that his legs and dingy tighty-whiteys could be seen. His tattered pockets were outside through the holes, hanging like disemboweled organs. Jerry was following behind with a slab of frozen pork and some large cans held awkwardly in his gangly arms. His long sleeve button-down shirt was frayed and ripped, his dirt-stained tennis shoes faded and falling apart.

"Ok..." Lyle decided. "Ok, I'll do it. For the others."

Kimmy smiled excitedly. Both their hearts were already pounding. "Just us, so no one else can get in trouble."

They caught up with Luco before he disappeared into the woodline and told him.

"There's your fighting spirit,” Luco grinned devilishly. “Need a few minutes to suit up?"

They looked at each other quietly.

"Oh, wow." Luco looked genuinely embarrassed for them. "No mag pouches, no extra mags, nothing?"

Lyle showed him the one extra mag he had for his 1911.

He turned them right around by the shoulders and took them to Delton's tent, where Augustus was playing on his Nintendo DS. He looked up at them with one eye for just a second.

"Let's see what we've got here..." He looked them over. "Yo big boy! Four AR mags, whatever 1911 mags are lying around, and a handful of 5.56 stripper clips. Two big backpacks, just to borrow. And mag pouches for both of them."

Augustus looked up at them annoyedly, growled deeply. Kimmy and Lyle backed away, but when Luco stood, waiting impatiently, Augustus turned around and slowly got the gear.

Luco strapped the pouch belts around them. They were big and unwieldy, especially on Kimmy, made of starchy olive drab fabric with metal-buttoned pouches.

"Not fancy and looks like it’s from the Cold War, but should work. You want the rifle mags on the left and pistol on the right.” He came over to Lyle and helped him put the magazine pouch and backpack on. “You're shit outta luck with only having that one mag for the AUG, but at least it's a 40-rounder. You can take out the mag when it’s empty and use these stripper clips to put in 10 a time. Easier than one at a time." He gave over a handful of the thin, curved metal things.

"Stripper clips, like an M1 Garand from World War 2?" Lyle asked, looking one over. He saw that the springy metal clips retained ten cartridges side by side.

"Something like that." He slapped the pouch full of empty, jangling clips hanging on Lyle's waste. "And practice loading with them or you'll be shit. Now how are you doing on ammo? Enough to fill those up at least?"

The two looked unsure.

"Bunch of .45 and 5.56," Luco demanded Augustus. He seemed hesitant. "Come on! These are our soldiers. We gotta keep 'em in the fight!

Augustus opened a smaller locker. It was the one double locked with an extra chain. He carried out two massive handfuls of paper ammo boxes in different colors and Luco distributed them to Lyle and Kimmy. They felt much heavier with two hundred or so more shots worn on them.

"Load up while we go. This'll be a cakewalk."

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Ten minutes away from camp, they started seeing the backs of big new-construction houses through the woods. It was an exhilarating but terrifying sight, because on an animal level they had come to believe that windows shoot at you. Additionally, Luco had blasted them nonstop with tactical knowledge and technical lingo about weapons and gear. Lyle understood about half of it, but it was all gibberish to Kimmy.

"We keep Fire fuckers and random looters mostly out of the neighborhood. We shoot and they don't know where the shots come from. So these few houses here, almost untouched." Luco kissed his fingers like a French chef. "The creme de la creme."

"Are you French?" Kimmy joked.

"A little bit..."

"Ahh, c'est magnifique."

"...but mostly Italian. And Irish."

"Oh."

"Yep. But I'm pure..." He looked at her with a second thought, "pure European going back to the motherland." He looked proud.

"Ah, wish I knew, but your peeps didn't worry much when they were carrying us over on slave boats."

"That was actually..." He thought to himself again. "Well, I'm sure when 23andme is back you can find out whether you came from the Gambooboos or the Poopeepees."

Kimmy got a little hot in the face, but smiled. "My family came from French Louisiana. *Ils parlent Creole.*"

"Tasty. Guess that's why you speak Frog."

*"N'est pas un peu."*

"Well, the only thing that helps out here is speaking right, clear and quick. Don’t waste words and don’t hesitate. If you see someone, you shoot them. No questions asked."

"Not even a warning shot?" Lyle asked. "Give 'em a chance to surrender?"

"Only dead people believe in warning shots. If you let one guy skip around a corner, suddenly you're the prey. Let a whole group of them take up a position and suddenly you're surrounded."

Lyle knew he was right, but shooting someone on sight...? The thought of ever doing it again made his guts boil and his heart split in half. And it was going to get him or someone else killed.

"Locked and loaded. Single file, clear every room, and once we're clear, dig in,” Luco said, rubbing on some grey makeup and pulling up his mask. His visage became a white skull smile and two beady white eyes leering from a black balaclava. Lyle and Kimmy felt like amateurs and certainly nothing like killers.

They stalked up through the massive backyard of a big house on a pond, a path leading part ways around it then disappearing into grass. The tiny pond looked clearer and bluer than the great big one just next to camp. Lyle wanted to bathe in it, though it would have been freezing.

Two ducks waddled out of the water over a small crest that had hidden them. Luco suddenly detached a small grey folded rifle that they had barely noticed hanging from his back, aimed it at them and fired two careful shots with a *Pfft* sound no louder than a BB gun.

Small tufts of feathers popped out of the mallards as they went toppling over into the water, one flapping desperately and spinning in a circle until it stilled. Luco folded his silent backup gun, retrieved the two birds, slapped some of the water off of them and hung them off his pack, smiling. "Nothing like getting it fresh off the bone. Someday the expired canned food is gonna run out."

Lyle could only think of the pet parrot his aunt once had, a devious and moody creature named Gladdy that would thrash in its cage and scream most of the time, but let itself be gently pet on the magnificent tuffs of soft white feathers crowning its head. He imagined having to eat her and felt terrible. Couldn't he have taken them back to camp, to lay eggs and breed like the other birds?

*Stop thinking like an idiot,* he reminded himself. *Be tough.* "Don't you have to eat two hearts now?"

Luco laughed and kept walking.

They followed him up toward the house in a straight line, watching both sides.

There was something almost comforting about being behind someone that seemed to know what they were doing. They began to feel like they were in a proper fireteam. They felt almost confident.

They got to the house and leaned back against it as he breached the door, knocking out a tiny window panel with a glass-breaking tool and letting himself inside. He pointed to a sign that warned "Protected by ADT Security Systems," and the half-skull over his face quietly snickered.

Inside, they moved quickly. Hushed calls of "Clear!" were the only sound beside their footsteps and the shuffling of equipment and squeaking-open of crystal knobs on white wooden doors. Luco breezed through, sharp and decisive, but every turned corner or new room flashed memories of exploding walls or whizzing bullets for Kimmy and Lyle. And the dead man— he was in every room, in every corner, riding in Lyle's head, buried in his pocket.

But before long the house was clear and locked down from the basement to the attic. He gave them the signal and they caught their breaths and began looking around more casually, starting with some sights of interest they'd noticed in the first sweep.

Luco left them to it as he explored the rest of the house. “Just don’t shoot me,” he cooly reminded them.

"Couple lived here, no kids," Lyle said, as they checked the master bedroom.

"Old, maybe," she added, looking through a closet of old dresses and gaudy jewelry she'd never be caught dead in. But she was glad to stuff her pockets with rings, earrings, and necklaces that got left, and her bag was already bulging with clothes before she started contemplating what sizes her friends back at camp might need.

"Not too old, or there'd be more meds." He slammed the medicine cabinet in the bathroom shut after he'd swiped its whole contents into his bag and checked the guy's closet.

He sorted through shoeboxes, hoping for anything of value, something as simple as an old .38 hidden in a sock with a box of cartridges. He had to reach far back and a box spilled Polaroids and 3x5 photos all over him. He knelt down and looked through them.

A happy couple in their 40s. Friends and families. They liked wine and parties, boats and skiing and trips to New Hampshire and Maine, and somewhere down south.

Down south... He hadn't thought about that for a while. Was he supposed to be rustling through these boxes right here and now, or should he be somewhere past the Mason-Dixon and Blue Ridge Mountains? He remembered the saying that wherever you are is where you belong. Was it true?

"They look happy," Kimmy said, suddenly beside him, rising up with a picture of the two homeowners. They were smiling in it, guests at a wedding.

"Yeah... Wonder if they're still alive. Just maybe."

She stared at the picture for a while. Lyle noticed her slip it into her pocket as he walked away, not intending him to see it.

"Did you know them?"

"No, it's just... Not a lot of happy faces nowadays." She half-smiled sadly. "I always wanted to get into photography. I mean, I'd take pictures, but I mean really into it. I wanted to do hair and makeup at weddings and things, be the one to take the photos too, get the perfect angle of people's happiest days."

"There's still happy days coming. It's not all bad yet."

She nodded thoughtfully, turned back to the closet. "I'm going to pack clothes for everyone so you can focus on... whatever else you think they need."

"Right." This was for everyone. It was easy to forget during what felt like a cross between a free shopping spree and a home invasion.

He started in the kitchen downstairs. They had lots of good food, but he forced himself to take what seemed most practical... salt, spice mixes, canned goods... That's when he spied a package of Chips Ahoy Chewy cookies and his hands were tearing it open before his mind knew what he was doing.

They had turned crunchy and very stale, but oh the richness! The long-forgotten chocolate chips melting in his mouth! He stuffed more in, one after the other, till he remembered that each one might be a bar of gold back at camp for all he knew. He was no closer to a good understanding of local market values, but he hadn't seen much candy since the chocolate Delton had gifted him.

His mouth was dry and packed with crumbs. He dumbly went toward the fridge, imagining a cold oasis of fresh milk and eggs inside, fizzy soda, a six pack of Coors Banquets like his parents drank. He was never much for drinking, but the fantasy of a seaside bar serving hot plates of cheesy loaded nachos and ice cold beer from the tap invaded his mind like some kind of ancestral memory besetting him, the 21 year old boomer he was slowly becoming. Ah, how nice freshly cut grass would smell right now.

There was a slam of metal on wood. Luco was parting one of his ducks from its head with a butcher knife on a huge wood cutting board. "I wouldn't open that fridge. Rookie mistake."

"Thanks." Lyle felt like he was caught sneaking into a cookie jar full of daydreams. He packed away his sweets and kept searching, watching Luco out of the corner of his eye. Flour, sugar, baking chocolate chips... anything that wasn’t mouse-bitten or infested with moths and bugs. Those could come in handy, but his bag was soon stuffed.

Luco laid a bird on the floor, spread and stepped on its wings and slowly pulled up on its legs, till it severed in two, revealing a perfect raw breast beneath. He took out the guts, picked a mangled copper hollow point out of the breast, and started working on the wings and breasts, creating a horrible mess of stringy guts, organs, ligaments, and discarded handfuls of bloody feathers over these people's immaculate kitchen. A gamey smell wafted in the room like a zoo cage.

Lyle must have looked horrified, because Luco chuckled and bundled most of the waste in a sheet of newspaper. "Don't worry, I'll leave it outside in case you decide to raise a family here. Besides, it’ll bring more raccoons around to shoot."

"Or if the family ever comes back," Lyle said without thinking.

Luco put down the knife with a clank. "You're joking, but that's the problem with most people out here. They're still thinking in the past, waiting for the Army or someone to roll through and make everything right again." He held out a tiny dark red organ, rubbery aorta atop it. "Try some heart?"

Lyle took it hesitantly. It was smaller than a 50 cent machine bouncy ball and when he tried to squish it, it was firm. It reminded him of rigor mortis and frozen corpses. It reminded him of the dead man.

"I haven't killed anything yet," he lied.

"You will." Luco went to the wall and pulled off a picture of the happy couple. It looked like they were at that seaside bar Lyle had imagined, smiling at the camera with the lights of a ship-filled marina behind them just after sunset. "Everyone wants to go back to this, but Spencer taught us to embrace the new world. This is the new normal."

Lyle looked between the little heart in his hand and the photo in Luco’s hand.

"The question is how soon we admit that to ourselves. And what we do about it."

He tossed the picture to Lyle, who fumbled and dropped everything to the floor with a crash. The little heart sat atop the photo in a pile of shattered glass.

Kimmy had appeared. She looked at it disappointedly.

"Find everything you're looking for?" Luco asked her, eyeing her up.

"Full up," she forced herself to say.

"Already? Guess we'll have to search the other houses another time." His bag looked like nothing had been added to it, but he pulled out a stack of small photos that showed the wife in a number of lewd positions. "You never know what you'll find."

"Gross!" Kimmy exclaimed and turned to Lyle. "Did you get dinner plates?"

"Damn. I didn't. And I can't fit another thing in my pack."

"Stuff some in your shirt," Luco suggested, cleaning his nails with a knife. "Call it your first plate carrier." He laughed.

The others were silent, but Lyle picked up a handful of giant dinner plates and stuffed them up under his shirt and tucked it in, tightening his belt. He moved and clanked around. It seemed like it would hold, but it was heavy. "Thank God it's a short way back."

"Yeah, or that racket would tip everyone off." Luco smirked.

Kimmy dropped a handful of silverware down his shirt for good measure.

"Hey, come on! There's a fork jabbing me in the ribs now!"

She shrugged and wrapped up some steak knives and kitchen knives in towels and put them in the side pockets of her backpack. "I'll carry these at least."

Luco washed his hands in the sink with a jug of white vinegar, then strapped it to his bag. The ducks had been turned to meat and waste wrapped in separate wads of newspaper. "Well, that's our adventure for the day."

Kimmy brushed off the broken photo and placed it back on the counter next to her rifle. She looked like she was struggling to put it all back together in her mind.

Luco walked over to the glass door, turning the heart into a mushy splatter in the middle of the hardwood floor.

"Here's to my furry friends," he said, sliding the glass open and tossing the waste outside. Immediately the door exploded in a rain of shards and snapping bullets. Luco hit the floor.

Lyle ran beside him, a shot splintering the wood frame by his head, and fired blindly outside. Boom! Boom! Boom! The AUG sounded like a mortar, filling the house with deafness. Lyle stuck his head out and saw the shooter. He had suddenly stopped firing, struggling with a jammed gun.

"Stop!" Lyle screamed. It was the dead man now, standing there again, face twisted in horror. "Drop it, motherfucker! Drop it!”

He trained his gun on him. He saw him through the sights, the black circle lined right up on his chest. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't pull the trigger. He just screamed and screamed, hoping it would make him drop it and run away.

But the kid pulled his rifle up— it was no longer the dead man, but a scared teenager— and aimed it right at Lyle, who watched down his sights knowing he was going to die now.

*I’m sorry,* he thought in his head.

Boom! Boom boom boom boom! Boom! Boom!

Lyle was on his back, staring up at the ceiling. All he could think about was the white plaster swirls and how they would spin and twirl at him sometimes as a kid, if he looked at them just right on a sleep-deprived night. Those swirls were perfect.

Night... Sleep... What good ideas. It was all coming soon. His eyes began to close.

Suddenly he started moving, dragged across the floor. Kimmy appeared over him, her face haloed in angelic light. She was shouting something.

"Just go to sleep," Lyle tried to tell her. "God's up there waiting..."

A hard slap to the face jolted him out of it. The other half a dozen slaps put some fire back in his blood. He sat up screaming, his chest full of slicing pain.

Luco was crawling over. Kimmy dragged him the rest of the way and he crouched over Lyle, pulling his shirt up. There was a jingle of cutlery falling out, and he tossed away shards of broken dishes. He poured half of the vinegar over Lyle, who tried to scream but had never stopped screaming from a moment ago.

"You're fine, kiddo!" Luco said, muffling him with his vinegar soaked hand. "Bullet broke up and barely went in, you’re fine!"

He waited for Lyle's eyes to calm a little, then peeled his hand back. More screams came out.

"I need you to calm down. When I tell you it's not bad, you gotta trust me, okay?"

Lyle nodded and blink, breathing as deep as he could through his nose, feeling like he was drawing up glass into his chest.

Luco slowly let him go. Lyle's eyes fluttered between the two. He slowly sat up with a grunt. He looked at his chest and saw a lot of blood and ripped skin and dagger shards of broken ceramic. He cried out again and collapsed in horror.

"Oh, for fuck's sake— can you hold him?" Luco struggled to his feet and ran out the door, shouldering through the broken glass.

"Lyle, it's not as bad as it looks," Kimmy promised, practically smothering him with both hands. "We gotta go."

Lyle slowly got ahold of himself. She helped him up and picked what she could off his belly as he winced and whined. Then she yanked his arm nearly out of his socket, taking him outside. They ran over to Luco and the wounded boy, who was lying on the ground, making a horrible wet sound with each breath. He had a dog tag on with his name etched over an American flag with a single red line through the center, but the name was hard to see.

Luco picked two deformed bullets out of his own vest, flicked them onto the kid. "Woo! Did you see that? That's everything wrong with .22s right there! Jammed right up on him! Now look here,” he ducked down by the kid, excitedly pointing out the kid’s wounds with his hands. “Sucking chest wound. You got lucky! But this guy's done."

The boy was pale and sweaty, head veins bulging. His eyes wandered between them and the sky. He looked like he was struggling to say something.

"But homegirl saved the day! Go ahead. Finish what you started." Luco offered her his black Sig Sauer P365XL pistol, hand shaking in excitement. She just looked at it dead eyed.

"No! We can apply pressure... Put plastic over the hole..." Lyle said, stumbling over his words. He took off his bag and searched for a candy bar to unwrap.

"Are you gonna do surgery on him too, guy? Pick the fragments out of his lungs and close the holes?" He shook the gun at both of them. "Finish it!"

They both stared at him and the kid lying there, who was turning blue and quiet.

"Ah for God's sake." Luco pointed his pistol. A shot rang out and blood poured out of the hole in the boy’s skull. Luco holstered his gun and shakingly took out his bag of salted hearts. He popped one in his mouth and crunched down.

"You did good. You're a killer now," he told Kimmy, and handed her the slain boy's rifle. "Keep it. War trophy." He turned to Lyle and just shook his head, marched off back toward camp with the boy’s dog tag hanging around the bag of hearts clenched in his hand.

Lyle looked at the dead kid, his eyes still fixed on the grey sky, and thought of sleep and death.

"Kimmy..."

She slammed the gun into Lyle's bleeding chest and ran away. He stood there a while, the cool wind blowing. The forest and houses looked down on him accusingly. The ghost of the dead man stood just behind.

###

### 22 - The trial

"Plague!"

"Horsemen!"

Michael stepped from behind a bush, acknowledging Lyle's answer to today's challenge word to sort out friends from intruders. But Michael looked upset.

"Xavier wants to see you."

\*\*\*

Lyle was stripped of his weapons by Michael and marched off toward Xavier's tent. He had always felt dutifully respectful to him but still in some sense an equal, someone he had gone to school with.

Now, however, Charle’s authority was foreboding and harshly real, as Lyle was presented to his tent like a prisoner to stand trial.

Xavier sat with Laramie and Chadwick at his sides. Others watched from inside their tents or stood nearby in a semicircle of curious and concerned bystanders. Delton and Augustus stood with arms crossed, still close to their bank-home. Cook pretended to focus on his cheffing, trying to keep Jerry and Jeff's attention, but of course they were all fixed on the scene. Diana and Gavin stumbled into the fold and held each other up on wobbly drunk legs. Beckett ran up but was stopped and taken aside by Michael, who was acting as bailiff.

Xavier's eyes considered the accused for a while. Suspense slowly rose, then he broke the silence: "So, you went looting after I explicitly asked you not to, for the safety of the entire camp."

Lyle was still dazed. Not just by the surreal scene that he had been whisked into, but by the death that still lingered in his brain. A push from Michael brought him to.

"It was in the neighborhood just a few minutes away..." Lyle explained.

"I know where you were. Outside of camp, where the Firestarters and every other raider gang are on the warpath, where scouts are everywhere searching to find *this* camp. Many of their camps aren’t far away."

“Then isn’t it just a matter of time before they find us?”

Xavier raised his eyebrow angrily.

Lyle backed down. "We thought it would be okay. I'm sorry. It was my decision and my mistake."

"Who is ‘we?’"

Lyle looked at Spencer, who seemed to be grinning. "Me and Kimmy. I forced her because I wanted to be able to carry more stuff. It seemed like a safer part of the neighborhood that had barely been touched. We just wanted necessities for our people."

“And the gunshots? Someone encountered you?”

“A Firestarter scout. He wore a Thin Red Line dog tag. We shot him down. He was... just a kid.”

“Not as safe as you thought, was it?” Xavier noted. But his words seemed too harsh even for himself and he pondered quietly for a minute.

Xavier asked Spencer: “What do you think? Was it fair to order them not to loot, in your estimation? Your boys are the ones watching the enemy’s movements.”

Spencer shrugged. “It was the safe call. But maybe if I was in their position I’d have done the same thing.”

Everyone looked at Lyle, knowing that his and most of his people’s clothes were falling apart.

“Look, just don’t hold Kimmy responsible. I told her it was okay. Please, man,” Lyle pleaded.

“I won’t punish her, but I can punish you. One week on shitter duty. Two if I don’t like how you do it. You’ll be on call day or night to empty the port-o-john, keep it shining and spotless inside, and wash up anyone who falls off the shitting pole into the cesspool.”

“Woah dude, cleanin’ up mad shit! That’s gonna suck!” Laramie exclaimed. Xavier slowly turned and stared him down till he said, “...My bad...” and quieted up.

“I’ll do it...” Lyle conceded. Somehow he could already smell the toilet from here.

“Unfortunately, that’s not all.” Xavier leaned forward in his seat with an ominous stare. “Our meat chickens have begun to go missing since your people arrived. At first we gave you the benefit of the doubt, assuming it was a fox or something, but we lost five more in the past week, including two just this morning... while you were gone.”

“It wasn’t us!”

“I know...” Xavier motioned at Lyle’s full pack, which Mike had taken possession of. “But we have a witness who says who it was. Bring him over.”

Mike waved someone over. Ozy the Tree Kid appeared with one of Spencer’s men beside him, Chuck.

Chuck was the Boogie Boy most seen around camp, but like the others, he paid little attention to any of the newcomers, coming and going about his own business, lurking by himself, speaking into his accursed headset like he was talking to fairies in the air. He had pink, freckled skin like he was permanently sunburnt, and the look of a lumberjack, short brown hair, a bushy red beard and a crazed look in his eyes accented by wizardly eyebrows and a disposition that was anything but wizardly. He was a man who thought the whole world was his, but was constantly angry that he could never quite seize it.

“Here’s the brat,” he said, pushing Ozy into the mix and crossing his arms, a tinge of *schadenfreude* in his face.

Xavier cleared his throat. “Ozy, you say that you saw from your tree who was taking the camp’s chickens. Point him out.”

Ozy turned about the camp with his finger near his lip. One could expect anyone to be accused; he took a full minute, looking hesitant, his eyes switching around between people.

“Ozy?”

“It’s him!” He pointed right at Jerry, who looked docile and unwary as ever.

“Jerry?!” Lyle, Beckett and Jeffy exclaimed.

“Come over,” Xavier commanded. Jerry put down the chicken he was cleaning at the cooking tent and came over. Jeffy and Cook followed behind, but stayed by Mike as Jerry stood beside Lyle. “What’s your name?” Xavier asked him.

“Jerry’s name is Jerry Pinehalst.”

Xavier was taken aback. “And do you always speak in the third person, Mr. Pinehalst?”

He shrugged.

“Are those feathers on your hands?”

Jerry held them up and nodded. They were bloody and covered with small white feathers.

“And did that come from a chicken?”

Jerry nodded.

“From the camp’s chicken coop?”

Jerry nodded.

“Xavier, I had him fetch that bird,” Cook protested. “I wanted to perfect my chicken omelettes for the two month anniversary of setting up camp here.”

“Hm.” Xavier stroked his chin and looked back at Jerry. “But it would be an easy thing to take a second one while you thought no one was watching, now wouldn’t it?”

“Exactly!” Ozy yelled. “I saw him take two!”

“Is that right? Two birds exactly? One in each hand?”

Ozy nodded vigorously, his brows furrowed and serious.

“Chuck, how many chickens were taken this morning?”

“Three.”

Ozy deflated a little.

“So we have a math problem here, don’t we?” Xavier sighed.

“Oh, to hell with this,” Chuck said. He stomped over and pulled Jerry’s notebook out of Jerry’s pocket. “Who cares about chickens? Look what this freak has in his little book.” He threw it to Xavier, who started reading through it slowly.

“What am I looking at here?”

“He’s psychotic. He’ll probably cut all our throats in the middle of the night.”

“Hm. Cook, come take a look. What do you think of that?”

Cook flipped through nearly every page before he handed it back. “Pheasant thighs in sauce with cracked pepper and cream corn... pork and beans on flatbread...”

Xavier threw it at Chuck, who picked it out of the dirt and opened it. Shock and anger filled his wild eyes. Recipes on every page, written in perfect handwriting.

“What the fuck? It was all in there, crazy stuff. I saw him writing it day after day...”

“Crazy delicious, maybe,” Cook joked.

“Cook, what about the rumblings that Jerry isn’t doing enough?” Xavier asked.

“He’s a hard worker and a fast learner. When he puts his mind to something, nothing stops him. Does anyone have a problem with the grub since him and Jeffy started helping me?”

Of course, no one would dare insult the food, and Cook used that to his and Jerry’s advantage. There were heads shaking no and negative rumblings all around.

“Chuck, get out of here, you maniac.” Spencer waved the burly red-bearded man away and he growled and left.

Cook went on: “Xavier, I’ve spent time with everyone from the new party and they’ve all struck me as good people, if not outright proven it like these two. I’d ask everyone to keep that in mind before they go judging.” With that, Cook walked back to his tent. Jeffy and Jerry went with him.

Xavier was flustered now. “Ozy, why did you lie to us? Did you take the chickens?”

“Here’s why,” a raspy robotic voice said, like someone speaking through a fan. The whole camp turned in surprise and gasps went up like scared birds flushing from a field.

A slim figure stood in all black, a camo rifle slung over his shoulder, a thick ghillie suit of tan, grey, green camouflage and picked spring foliage strapped to his backpack, a thick belt of pouches around his waist. Every bit of skin was hidden by black garb, his face covered by a voice-changing digital mask and massive goggles that made him look even more inhuman than the rest of the Boogie Boys.

“Tacitus...” some whispered.

He was dragging two kicking, thrashing children who were zip-tied together by the wrists, their other arms tied behind them to their belt loops, their cries muffled by duct tape over their mouths. He knocked their legs out from behind with two quick, well-placed kicks and they fell to their knees.

One was a girl with minty green eyes and wavy blonde hair matted with sweat and filth, the other a skinny boy with spiky black hair and a severe look. Tears were streaming down their eyes, cutting through the dark dirt encrusted on their faces.

"Get down," Tacitus suggested to the camp.

Suddenly .22 shots cracked from nearby woods. People scattered and hit the ground.

But silence followed, and as everyone looked around, glued to the dirt or cowering from behind tents or boxes, it seemed no one was hit. And the dark Tacitus still stood there silent and unmoved, holding the two kids, a tiny black silenced pistol aimed at the young blonde girl’s head.

"Who are you!?" Xavier shouted to nowhere. He was hiding behind his toppled beach chair throne. Laramie's arms were grasped around him for life till Xavier pried him off.

A long pause ensued. Then a reply from the woods: "Let them go and we won't shoot you all!"

Tacitus bent down and whispered something in the kids' ears and ripped the tape off their mouths. The boy started thrashing and screaming again and got the tape slapped back on, but the girl lowered her head, defeated: "Please come out! They got us. It’s over."

Tacitus whispered something else in her ear.

"Both of you..."

And he whispered again.

"*Doggy doggy...*"

"What the fuck?" Lyle muttered, who had been dragged behind a tent by Michael.

"Maybe it's some kind of code,” Michael whispered.

"...Can I have my gun back?" Lyle asked.

Michael groaned and handed the 1911 to him, but kept the AUG slung around his back. "Just don't do anything stupid."

The voice from the woods cried out again: "Last chance! Free them... or die!"

"Wait..." Lyle said, standing up. "I know that voice..."

"What're you doing?!" Michael demanded in a hushed voice, trying to grab Lyle and pull him back to safety.

Lyle ran back to the center of everything, near Tacitus and the two kids and started shouting to the voice in the woods. "Remember me? You ambushed us a week ago, took our car but let us have our stuff! You didn't shoot us when you could have! I know you're reasonable and care about your friends. The people in this camp are good and peaceful. Come and join us. You don't have to wander!"

Hushed mutterings went over the whole camp. Everyone was hunkering down, taking up defensive positions with guns raised, except Lyle... and Jerry, who just sat on his log stool watching, Cook and Jeffy pleading for him to hide in the tent.

Another young boy came out of the woods slowly, clad in thick dirty camouflage clothes, holding a .22 rifle that was nearly as tall as he was. He pulled down his mask and threw off his cap, revealing a handsome ruddy face capped by rough, dirty blond hair. He placed down his gun and made a complex series of hand signs toward apparently nothing, directly opposite them. “I’m Jack, our leader.”

Chuck the fiery Boogie Boy was marched out of the opposite side of the woods, hands tied behind his back. A small person in full black gear was holding him at gunpoint with a silenced Ruger Mk4 pistol. They looked like a smaller clone of Tacitus: eyeless black goggles, bandana, every inch of skin covered, turning them into something inhuman and secret.

“And that’s Smoke,” Jack said.

"What the hell is going on!?" Xavier shouted. “Who’s this mini Tacitus?”

"We've got one of yours, you have one of ours," Jack said, standing on his gun. "We want safe passage for the five of us and we'll go."

“Five?”

He and Xavier both looked to Ozy, who seemed ashamed, his head hung low.

“So all of you little kids are part of the same team,” Xavier hummed. “Why, Ozy? Why would you betray us when we took you in?”

“Just let us all go,” Jack said. “We’ll never come back.”

"Not a chance," Spencer answered. "You have one of ours and we have all of yours. My guy's still out there with crosshairs on both of you. Even if your little Tacitus ripoff there blows Chucky-boy's brains out, the rest of you die."

Chuck started to protest and Smoke pistol-whipped him in the back of the neck, sending him to his knees in agony.

Spencer whispered quietly with Xavier, who reluctantly spoke up: "You can join up and be safe with us here, or a lot of us can die for nothing. Your only restriction will be that no more than two of you can go out at any time. We can't have you run away just to come back and wipe us out."

Lyle looked pleadingly at Jack. "Please. For your people."

Jack made a few hand signs at Smoke, who made no movement, no response.

Lyle noticed Spencer speaking into his mic furtively, and he felt disaster was near.

Suddenly Tacitus formed a string of sign language words and letters with his left hand toward Smoke.

Smoke waited a long while, before pushing Chuck to the ground and backing slowly into the woods, her weapon still trained on him. Tacitus let the children go and disappeared likewise.

The camp wondered at these two black-figured ghosts who had appeared unexpectedly and gone away just the same.

"Jack!" the blonde girl yelled to the blond boy. He ran over and cut their bindings. She cried and squeezed him. "I thought we were gonna have to do our last stand."

"Fuck the plan if it means losing you, Char."

The other boy ripped the tape off his mouth. "That's it?! Give up like that? Smoke could've killed them all!" His voice was all cracking and childish anger.

"And then you and Char would be dead, Zan."

The kid crossed his arms.

Lyle walked up to them. "You guys are the ones that shot at us and stole our car!"

"Yeah... Sorry about that, I guess."

"But... you're just kids!"

Jack motioned toward Chuck, who was just getting uncut by Spencer, swearing and pounding the dirt. “That’s what ‘just kids’ can do.”

"I mean, that was amazing. That one in all black-"

"Smoke."

"...capturing one of Spencer's guys... I thought they were untouchable."

"Smoke can do anything, be anywhere. No one can find her if she's hiding and no one's safe if she's hunting them."

"She?!"

"None of us know her real name. And she almost never takes her mask off."

"But she's so pretty underneath!" Char said.

"Why the sign language?" Lyle asked.

"She's deaf,” Char added.

Jack looked at Char with frustration, and she looked away, knowing she was revealing too much.

“Smoke taught us to speak with our hands like her,” Jack explained. “It's super useful. But who was the guy that caught Char and Zane, the one that looks like Smoke?"

"I don't know. Apparently he’s called Tacitus," Lyle said. "One of the three guys Spencer leads. The four of them are called the Boogie Boys."

"That's because 'The Aryan Brotherhood' was already taken," Spencer chuckled, approaching them with Chuck just behind. No one knew if he was joking. "My compadre is demanding an apology from your mysterious friend."

"An apology!" Chuck scoffed, red-faced and foaming at the beard, "I wanna kill him! And I say we execute all these little shits. Bad enough taking prisoners, since when do we take in enemies?!"

"If you even tried to shoot us, Smoke would finish you off!" Zane snapped.

"Oh yeah!? Why doesn't he come back here and we'll do it man to man! I'll throw a knife through that midget fuck! I'll strangle him and rip out his gullet! Are you fucking kidding me?"

"ENOUGH, Chuck! Not in front of the children," Spencer said, looking around the whole camp whose eyes were on them, and who were now emerging from their hiding places.

"You're never gonna find Smoke, so I'll say it: I'm sorry." Jack stretched out his hand.

Chuck looked at the friendly hand with his bulging eyes and spat on it, spittle running down his beard. He marched away then turned around. "And I want my gun back NOW or I'll start scalpin' you kiddies one by one."

Jack wiped his hand off his cargo pants.

"Excuse him," Spencer said. "He's a good soldier and accordingly doesn't like to lose. If his gun were returned to him, it would be a sign of good faith."

Jack nodded.

"As for your friend, I appreciate someone who moves without being seen. The similarity to Tac is uncanny."

"Tac? You mean Tacitus?"

"Yes, the quiet one who nabbed these two. He's our watcher, our sniper, our angel of death. The two of them might even get along."

"Or she’ll shoot him a hundred times!" Zane snarled.

Spencer laughed at Zane. "It seems this one and Chuck are similar too, in every way but size and complexion. If you ever want to train with us, come and see me." He ruffled Zane’s spiky hair and Zane pushed him off and clenched his fists. Char grabbed her friend’s wrists gently, to stop him from swinging.

Spencer walked away as Xavier came over, picking Jack's .22 rifle off the ground. "Making friends already?"

Jack raised his eyebrows and the others were giving Xavier the stink-eye.

Lyle remembered he had gotten his 1911 again in the chaos and handed it to Xavier. "Here. If you want me disarmed for the next week, I understand. I betrayed your trust. I shouldn’t have gone out with Luco."

“With Luco?” Xavier hummed. He looked at his armful of weapons and gave both Lyle and Jack theirs back. "Well, we're on the same side now. As long as we stand together, we'll get through this."

Jack considered his weapon, his little friends, the strangers all around him. His nostrils twitched, his shoulders turned uncomfortably. He put out his hand and Xavier shook it. Lyle, Michael and Char joined in exchanging handshakes. Jack elbowed Zane and he reluctantly greeted everyone too.

"I'm Jack Christiansen. This is my sister Chartreuse, a.k.a. Char, and our friend Zane, and that's my little brother Ozy." He pointed to Ozy, who was halfway up a small tree already. "Ozy! Down!"

Reluctantly, Tree Kid inched down and walked over, wallowing in a cloud of shame.

"At first, we were trying to steal what we could from your camp,” Jack admitted, “but when you guys captured Ozy, he followed our preplanned rules and acted like he was alone. After you took him in without hurting him, he started communicating to us from his tree. We decided to watch, learn what type of people you were while we waited to get him out. I guess now we know. But recently, we got so hungry. Staying out of sight is easy, but between your scouts and others, we couldn’t find enough food... He was stealing your chickens to keep us alive."

"I'm sorry," Ozy said to Xavier.

Xavier hummed, seeming overwhelmed. "The good news is you won't have to steal anymore." He pointed to Cook's tent, where Cook, Jeffy and Jerry were chuffing up a cloud of delicious smoke from a blazing fire beneath a load of speckled metal pots and cast iron pans laid out to feed their new guests. The kids' stomachs growled.

"But I want you in that pond right after you fill up. You guys smell like a locker room in a hot swamp. You can pick up soap and hygiene stuff from Delton, and a new set of clothes. His tent's right over there. Tell him it's on my tab."

Jack looked confused and uncomfortable at the charity. "Thank you.” The others echoed him dryly.

"But I mean it when I say no more than two out of camp at a time, and since it seems your other friend is not ready for our version of civilization yet, that means only one of you at a time. You'll have to get used to life around here."

Jack sucked up his young pride and nodded.

“What about staying put so the fire scouts don't find our camp?” Lyle asked.

“Too late for that it seems,” he said accusingly, then cushioned it with a smile. “No one wants to stay cooped up forever. But if you want to go and risk getting killed looting, at least coordinate it with Mike and Spencer, deal?”

Lyle and Jack both agreed.

"As for you," he turned to Ozy, "you were supposed to be one of us. Your punishment will be more severe... You will be my squire."

"Squire? Like knights?" Ozy pondered.

"That's right."

Ozy thought for a moment quietly then exploded in delight. "Awesome!"

"Ah-ah, you don't get off that easy. Your first duty is to share all the shitter-cleaning with Lyle for the next week. And you report back to me the moment it's done. Prove we can trust you again."

"Yes milord."

"You definitely don't have to say that."

"Yes sir."

Xavier smacked his head. "The rest of you will find jobs tomorrow and get weapons training from Gavin." The kids groaned. "I can tell you already know what you're doing, but that’s the rule. If we didn't make everyone do it, no one would. And our folks want to know the new kids running around camp won't be accidentally firing through their tents. So it’s mandatory."

Jack snorted. "Fine." He shoved Zane to let him know he'd have to do it with the rest of them. Zane whined and groaned, but Char looked delighted that there was peace and possibly even safety. The dirt and scars and scratches showed that life on their own had been rough.

Luco suddenly arrived with a duffle bag of guns, dropping them in the middle of everyone. "Gifts from Tac."

"Our guns!" Char and Zane pulled their .22s out, faces and voices full of glee.

"Where were you?" Xavier questioned, annoyed.

"Special mission," Luco answered.

"...How did it go?"

"Not so good. I'd come with me... when you're not busy."

Xavier's face dropped. "I'll talk to the rest of you later. Jack, you'll be speaking for your people?"

Jack looked at Lyle unsurely. Lyle met his eyes and nodded.

"Yes,” Jack answered.

"Good,” Xavier said. “See me tomorrow morning. We'll go over the other details and get you settled in. Get a tent from Delton too. And Ozy, get one of the one-person army tents. You set up next to me."

"Yes sir," he saluted. Xavier sighed and disappeared with Luco. Lyle wanted to call out to him but held his tongue.

The rest of them, Lyle, Mike, and the kids stood there unsurely.

"Get some food, guys. Meet the others and get some rest," Lyle told them. He and Jack shook hands, then the kids skittered to the food tent.

Michael slapped Lyle's back hard enough to remind him that his chest and stomach were still bloody and covered with broken glass. "You did good, buddy." He topped it off by shoving the AUG into his arms.

"Thanks," Lyle squeaked, putting his gun down. "But maybe you could help me with this." He lifted his shirt to reveal the mess underneath.

"Oh shit. Lie down. Did you just get hit?"

"No. Earlier, looting." Lyle lay on his back and looked up at the sky. He couldn't help but remember the dead Firestarter kid. Would death follow him everywhere forever now, leaking into his melting world like the anxious, crawling onset of a bad acid trip?

"I'm not seeing anything deep. What's with the glass?"

"Would you believe I had half a dozen dinner plates packed in there to carry back and they deflected a .22 round?"

"Well, I guess they make ceramic body armor, so there ya go. Seen stranger ways to pack things. When you nab a critter in the bush, you gotta get it home somehow. I’ve humped out a quarter of a deer in a backpack a million times."

"Have you killed a lot?"

"Oh yeah, we're a hunting, fishing family. Dad, gramps, uncles, both sides. I had a chest full of pelts, a handful of racks before all this. And a freezer full of good venison. Got a 14-pointer once, proudest moment of my life. I was 11, 12?"

"Ever killed a person out here?"

"That I can say no to, thank God."

Lyle turned his head, looking across the ground, feeling as small as a mouse in the dirt.

Grass, gravel, tents. Sounds of people. Death and violence in the air. "I did. I killed someone."

"Yeah?"

"Broke into my house. This was when my mom was still hanging on by a thread. Just me and her... I went downstairs, thinking it was an animal. But it was a man in my house. It was dark. I shot first, asked questions later like my dad taught. But the guy wasn't even armed. He was just hungry. He was just like you or me."

"Hmm..."

"I still carry his license with me. It's right here in my pocket."

Suddenly Lyle winced as Michael wiped his wounds with an alcohol-soaked cloth.

"Sounds like something I wouldn't want to hang onto." He wiped his hands with the rag.

"I still see him sometimes..."

"See him?"

"When I sleep. When I wake up. When I shoot..."

"That's rough."

"I wonder who he was, what he did, who loved him..." Lyle sighed deeply. "I choked when I aimed at that Fire scout today. He'd already hit Luco. He was about to put a bullet in my head but Kimmy shot him."

"Sounds like she did the right thing."

"That was my shot. I should’ve taken it. Now there’s blood on her hands too. It's my fault."

"Sit up," Michael said. And he started bandaging and wrapping around Lyle's torso. "I won’t lie, that's a lot to deal with and I’m sure it’s weighing on you. But you've got people that look up to you. Kimmy looks up to you. You gotta come to terms with what you did so she can do the same. That's what I think."

"... Am I a murderer?"

"...The lines aren't clear anymore. We all gotta make hard choices and live with 'em." He stuck his hand out and helped Lyle to his unsteady feet with a groan, then slapped him on the shoulder. "But if you're asking me, I don't think so. You're a good guy."

Lyle wanted to thank him but no words came. It was hard to breathe.

"Go see to your crew. Do your thing. You're good at it." Michael started walking away, kicking Lyle's loot bag to remind him it was there, full of things for his people. "And wash those wounds. You don't want em to fester."

Lyle stood alone, trying to find his balance in the cold, confusing world, trying to stop it from spinning. Suddenly a hand tapped him and he spun about, half-ready to strike. It was Jerry.

"Hello," he said.

"Hey Jerry."

"Jerry thanks you." He squeezed Lyle with a big, painful hug and walked back to Cook's tent. “Lyle could have told Jerry’s secret but didn’t. Jerry considers you a friend now.”

It took Lyle a minute to recover, but he felt a little clearer. Almost everything sucked... but not everything. Maybe he could learn to live with the pain.

### 23 - A world of shit

Kimmy was sitting on the dock by the pond, watching the surface ripple gently by the whims of the air. It looked like peace, then the next moment like chaos. The overcast sky was a pale color like bone or the cold skin of the dead or dying. She wanted to walk in the water and disappear beneath, away from the damnable world of men that shot and stabbed and strangled one another for so many terrible reasons.

"Took me a while to find you," Beckett said from behind her.

"Just go away."

"I heard what happened."

She turned back, put her feet back on the dock. "I'm sure everyone did. I shot someone, OK?"

"...I know. I just wanted..."

"To what? Say it's not my fault? I had to?"

"...to say that I'm here for you when you want to talk."

"...Great."

There was a long wait and a small sound of something being set down behind her.

She didn't want to see anyone's face. She didn't want to look back. But when she did, he was gone. A half bar of mint chocolate was lying behind her, just out of arm's reach.

She sighed and looked back to the water.

Beckett was going back to camp when he saw Jace walking toward Kimmy and the dock. "Hey."

"Hey. She's over there?" Jace asked Beckett.

"Yeah. Doesn’t seem to want to talk right now."

"I just wanted to apologize..."

"Whatever it is, it can wait."

"No, I mean to you..."

Beckett stood up straight and crossed his arms, curious.

"Look, I really like Kimmy. But I shouldn't have gotten between you two. I know you guys have a special thing and... I just want to say I'm sorry."

Beckett thought for a while. The silence was deafening for Jace.

"Youknow, when you guys first came around, I didn't like you," Beckett began. "I didn't like Lyle. I thought we had an ok thing going, me, Kimmy, and Jerry. We were scraping by without risking life and limb everyday."

"...I'm sorry..." Jace squeaked.

"Then you guys dragged us into gunfire, what, twenty minutes after we met? And a bunch of lunatics who wanted to burn us alive, all for a car and some gas. And the whole time, she's looking at you, staying up all night talking to *you.*"

"Beckett-"

"Shut it. So through all that, we get dragged here where everything is supposedly perfect— but it ain’t. Nowhere's safe, and now we're a big target just sitting here waiting for someone to come hit us."

He paused and breathed deeply. Jace's skin was crawling.

"But now we have people to back us up when that happens. We're not alone. Hopefully."

"Oh... yeah...”

"My heart's breaking for her. She shouldn't have to go through this. The worst part is I know she needs to figure it out for herself. That's how she is."

"But she can’t do it alone. You’re her guy!" Jace exclaimed. He got that look red in his eyes like he was going to cry. "She needs you!"

Beckett's eyes thinned, straining to understand. "What are you talking about?"

"You're her boyfriend, or lover or whatever you want to call it. She depends on you and she needs you... even if she doesn't show it."

Beckett's mouth twisted and curled into laughter. Jace just stood there.

"Dude, Kimmy's like a little sister to me. Where did you get the idea... Oh man."

"But you guys are like... partners..."

"Partners in crime, man, not like that." Beckett shivered then burst into laughter again, smacking Jace on the chest and even slapping his cheeks softly, which only confounded all of what Jace felt he knew more. "You're funny in a stupid way. I see why she says you’re *adorable.*" The word sounded like it was going to catch in his throat.

"Umm... thanks?"

Beckett heard something a ways off that caught his attention and suddenly changed his pace. "Don't mention it. Look, I don't know the right thing to do for her right now. I know she doesn’t want to talk to me. Maybe it'll be different for you." And he walked away, leaving Jace to ponder, looking wistfully and woefully in the direction of the dock.

Beckett pushed through brush toward the sound till he was close, then hid. A girl was throwing up and crying.

"You have to come back to the tent before someone sees you like this." The voice was male, but too hushed to recognize.

"I'm not. I'm staying here."

"They'll think you're sick-"

"I AM SICK!"

"So you're staying..."

The only reply was another round of retching. Panting. Sobbing.

"Rachel..." Beckett thought aloud from behind his tree.

"Snooping as usual," a voice caught him off guard. It was Luco.

"You'd only think that if you were watching me." In his head, Beckett smacked himself. That was the wrong thing to say.

Luco smiled wolfishly. "Security is my job. But that's what I don't get: everyone's got a job around here. What do you do?"

"I pull watch more nights than not."

"Ohh, watch! Must be hard staying up late listening to the trees." He threw his hands up with fingers opening and closing mockingly. "The only reason the rest of camp still does watch is because Xavier's too paranoid to just leave it to the experts."

"What makes you experts? Airsoft gear and a piece of coat hanger in your gun?"

"All that, plus skill." Luco drew his sidearm, aimed dead-on at an imaginary target to the right. He holstered it and swapped magazines in his AR with lightning speed and precision.

"Congratulations, you look like you’re playing *Call of Duty*," Beckett said, red with jealousy.

"I guess you don't appreciate real training. It's a shame. It's not too late to get good before some raggedy-ass kid shoots a pellet gun through your temple."

Beckett seethed. Once Luco knew that, he made a ta-ta motion and walked away.

Beckett shook his head and listened again. *Don't let them get to you.*

He left his cover for where Rachel and the guy had been talking. To his surprise, she was slumped over there alone, looking dead and cold. He ran up and turned her over. Her hair was sticking to dirt and vomit on the ground.

"Don't move me! Don't move me!" she pleaded as if coming to life.

"What're you doing here?"

"Just hanging out," she joked. A moment later she dry-retched.

Beckett waited till she stopped then asked her, "On dope still?"

She hesitantly looked up with one tired eye, as if to confirm who was there. "I'm just sick. Weak tummy."

"I know who you are, *Rachel*. You're Lindsey Sloan."

"...Who?"

"You got my cousin Becky and half her friends hooked on smack while you were still in high school. Another girl overdosed and they said you sold her the stuff that killed her."

Rachel just lied there on her knees and elbows looking ahead on the dirt and vomit she'd left, remembering. “People say all kinds of shit. That girl was my best friend.”

"So it is you."

"Congrats. What do you wanna do with this info?"

"Does Xavier know?"

"Who's idea do you think it was to use a different name?" She half-laughed. "I think he gets off... on pretending I'm someone I'm not."

Beckett crossed his arms. "I don't want you to poison this whole camp like you poisoned them. People are already vulnerable. It's the last thing we need."

Rachel wanted to laugh but retched instead. Nothing came out. "Who would wanna... share their drugs... during all this?... Besides, I'm off the stuff now... for good."

"That's what Becky said every time, before and after she got shipped off to rehab.”

“It’s just... withdrawals...” Rachel breathed heavily, the hot and cold overwhelming her. “...How is she, Becky?... Last time you checked?”

Beckett shrugged. “I don’t know. She moved to Cali, got on methadone therapy. Got a job at a pottery place teaching people or something. Loved it. Loved working with people. Sometimes I think about her and pretend it’s still like that, far away over there, like maybe the sky only fell here.”

Rachel groaned and rolled onto her side, half-circling her mess like a sad crescent moon.

“You don’t want to go back to your tent?”

“No. I'm fine.” Sweat and throw-up was matting her hair to her cheeks. “Can you just hand me that?” She pointed to a water bottle lying in the leaves where it looked like it had been kicked.

He didn’t want to give it to her. Something in him wanted her to suffer as retribution for the pain she inflicted on his cousin, for the damage she could cause the group with her selfishness now. But he picked up the water bottle, and when he squeezed it with a crinkling sound and realized it was empty, he gave her his own canteen.

"Get yourself straight," he said, watering her dry lips. He poured some on his hands and wiped her dirty hair off her face, washed some of the vomit out. "We need everyone at their best."

She looked up with sick, heavy eyes, maybe acknowledging his words, maybe just pretending to, and he left her there like she asked.

### 24 - Shitter’s full

“Shitter’s full,” Ozy said, cracking open the door to the dreaded navy blue port o potty.

“Yup,” Lyle agreed, sitting on a stump nearby. A slot had been opened in the back of the john and a crude flap added so that five-gallon buckets could be inserted under the toilet seat to collect waste.

"Oh poopy prison cell, what stenches your cracked plastic walls hold," Ozy lamented, opening the back flap, gagging. He wore thick yellow rubber gloves that went up past his elbows. "Hey, why aren't you helping me?"

"I already cleaned the whole inside while you were inspecting the shitting ditch."

"Hey! Do you wanna clean poopy people up? I had to make sure the shitting pole wouldn't roll or snap while people were using it. Turns out this one is built just right."

Lyle sighed. "Well, that's the last thing on our list, so empty the bucket in the ditch and call it a day."

Ozy tugged on the bucket full of waste, leaving him breathless. "Why do you think... they put the shit ditch so far... from the water we need to clean 'em? The pond?"

"So it's not stinking up camp all day like this big toilet. And so we're not polluting our only clean water source... Which it's probably soaking through to the groundwater and pond anyway."

At that moment, Ozy yanked out the bucket of shit, sending it past himself, spilling over the small incline behind the port o potty. The massive splatter of human excrement was a gruesome brown sight, struck through with a dozen different colors that bode of its many users. The stench invaded the air like a cloud of choking mustard gas, but Ozy just seemed pleased he wasn't completely covered in it.

"Okay..." Lyle slapped his skull hard over and over. "Let's get some water and try to clean it up before everyone notices. And clean yourself up too."

"Lyle," Beckett appeared, with Jerry and Jeffy behind him. "Jeffy said you wanted us all to meet."

"Yeah. Where is everyone?"

"Kenny's out with Mike as usual. Says he's hunting for the big one, whatever that means. Kimmy's by the dock still... dealing with what happened. Jace is... I don't know... talking to her, or off by himself sulking."

"Damn. I have to hand out the stuff we looted, but half of us are AWOL."

"*Ly-uhl!* Help me with this!" Ozy yelled.

"Go grab water! You made the damn mess!"

"We're partners! One mess is everyone's mess!"

"Go grab water! I'll be right there! And clean your boots off."

Ozy ran off complaining.

"How's that going for you?" Beckett snickered.

"Ah, lovely kid. I preferred him up in the tree. Little weirdo."

"You'd be weird too if you had to deal with your parents dying so young."

Lyle wanted to argue— hadn't they all dealt with that? But he knew Beckett was right. And an idea flashed in his head.

"Hey, how about you take care of dishing out the stuff to everyone? We need someone fair, responsible, trustworthy..."

Beckett thought about it for a moment, his arms crossed as usual and shrugged. "Nah. I'm good."

"What? Why? It's like the easiest job. You just watch the stuff and hand it out as needed."

"Exactly. And I can't do watch shifts if I'm glued to bags of crackers and pots and pans or whatever." Beckett looked around then pointed back at Jerry and Jeffy with his thumb. "Why don't you give it to them?"

"Uh..." Lyle looked flabbergasted. “Jerry and Jeffy are... are, uhm...”

"They're always here at camp with Cook, right in view of our tent. There's two of them, so they can make more balanced decisions than one person, and they're... well, Jerry's an easy guy to deal with."

Jeffy cocked his head and Jerry looked up with his alien eyes and smiled faintly.

"That sounds just like what you'd say, anyway. Give 'em a try,” Beckett suggested.

"Yeah! Come on! We'll guard the stuff!" Jeffy shouted. Jerry nodded in agreement.

Lyle looked hesitant, then he heard Ozy crying out for him by the pond's edge. "Damn it. Okay. You guys are in charge of the stuff. But go easy handing it out. Everyone gets a fair share... Plus there's some stuff in there I picked out for myself."

"You got it, boss!" Jeffy said in a scratchy voice and saluted.

Lyle sighed and stalked off toward the pond where Ozy was shouting and flailing. "Alright, I'm coming!"

The other three just stood there till Jeffy beamed and shook with excitement. "Let's go see what he got!"

Beckett grabbed his shoulder and looked down at him. "Hey, I got you the job so I get dibs." They walked over to the tent together, Jeffy hopping between them gleefully.

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Kimmy sat by the pond, watching the grey sky broken into a sea of amber shards by the setting sun, reflected by quiet water. The darkening earth brought cold, and still her mind played through scenes of violence and gunfights, shots fired in anger, bullets whizzing by her twitching ears like the sound of steel mosquitoes. She gripped her fists and clenched her jaw and tried to cry and it was all the same. She felt like a robot, but robots weren’t supposed to feel pain like this.

She heard a rustling sound and turned around, teeth bared, some part of her wishing she hadn’t dropped her gun somewhere along the road home from the dead boy she killed. A figure was crouched, seemed to notice her, and started to shuffle away.

“Wait! Stop!” she commanded.

The figure stopped and turned toward her. She already knew it was Jace from his shape.

“Hey, it’s me,” he said.

“What’re you doing?”

“Dropping some stuff off for you, if you want it.” Even in the fading twilight, she thought she felt him blushing. He stepped forward a little, coming out of the shadows of the woods. The skin of his face glowed and the falling sun blazed in his sad eyes.

“I got my own bag from the run.” She almost forgot that she had dropped that too, somewhere along the cascading path of memories that streamed out of the back of her skull like tassels of shredded flesh and brain that threatened to snag on everything in the world and turn her inside out.

“I know, we found your stuff and put it in the tent.” He tapped his leg nervously, then pointed toward the bag he left for her. “Anyway there’s stuff for girls in there and you’re the only girl in our group so...”

“I said I got my own.”

He nodded and stepped back into the dark. She didn’t like the way he seemed to disappear on that threshold between light and dark.

“Don’t go,” she peeped.

He stopped, his face masked in shadows.

“I’ve been sitting here all day hoping the feeling would go away, but nothing seems different.”

“I know. I’ve been here behind you for... a while.” He didn’t want to admit he had watched her silently for hours, paralyzed by indecision.

Her cheeks warmed with a flood of emotions— surprise, anger, and confusion: “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“I figured you wanted to be left alone to figure stuff out for yourself.”

“I thought I did... I don’t think it’s gonna happen in one day.” She looked back toward the water. It looked more and more bleak and cold by the moment, but suddenly Jace was sitting next to her. He smelled like honey and bonfires and she could feel his warmth, even if she was just imagining it.

She braced herself to hear him say he was sorry, that she didn’t deserve this, that she did what she had to do. But he didn’t say anything, just stared ahead silently and occasionally snuck a glance her way. And she loved him for it.

### 25 - The debate

Jeffy was in the tent sorting through their miniscule stock of socks and underwear when Kenny marched in, wearing that same insufferably determined look he had since he started departing most days in the early mornings to hunt with Mike in the woods.

It bothered Jeffy to no end when his brother came back with nothing, and even more so when he came back with something. It bothered him most of all that his brother’s new friend and hobby stole him away most of the time, when he needed him most— though he would never admit it.

“Gimme some socks. My feet are freezing out there. Hunting for ‘yotes tonight,” Kenny said.

“‘Yotes?”

“Coyotes.” He said it with two syllables now, when he’d always said it with three before. “They’re eating up all the quails and squirrels we want. It was bad enough before but now they’re going hog-wild with no humans killin’ 'em. Just imagine, the ultimate scavengers, no natural predators. We gotta knock 'em back down the totem pole, drop their numbers. Stack some pelts.”

Jeffy shook his head at a lot of questions he didn’t want answered. “We’re supposed to organize these and only hand 'em out as needed,” he said sternly, carefully attending to the mismatched socks.

“I need 'em now! I’ll make it up to everyone when I bring in the big kill. Dinner for everyone!”

“Are you gonna eat a coyote?”

“...I’d try it. Yeah,” Kenny answered, looking like he had never quite thought of it.

“Do you think anyone else is gonna eat it?”

“That’s not the point. Now gimme some socks, butthole. Two pairs!”

“We only have six pairs total right now.”

“They’re extras! I’ll bring 'em back. Jeez. You try to help out around here...”

Jeffy marched over and delivered two pairs of stained grey crew socks. His brother turned around immediately, satisfied, and walked out the door of the tent. Jeffy growled and followed him out uncontrollably. “What’s wrong with you lately? You’re acting just like Mom.”

“What’s that mean?” Kenny cocked one eye.

Jeffy had meant that his brother was coldly ignoring him to focus on his own new goals... that he had abandoned him in a time of crisis to the loneliness of life that was almost unknown to siblings who had always shared a room and most of the hours of every day... that Kenny was unknowingly subjecting himself to trauma similar to that of having to share their mother with a new boyfriend who was not their beloved, drunken, sloppy loser of a dad...

But Jeffy had wandered onto the precipice of the sort of heart-to-heart discussion that boys and men young and old disdained to have, and so instead spat out the first thing that came to mind: “You’re acting... like the ignorant papist you are!”

Luco and Chuck were walking by with Orwell, who was in the process of selling them a rare but outdated technical manual on the repair of various firearms from the 80s, and an instruction book for mixed martial arts from the early 2000s. They stopped instantly to observe the spectacle, their noses twitching, nostrils flaring from the acrid scent of a freshly-sparked quasi-religious debate.

Nothing was more delightful to Luco and Chuck than the controversial topics of politics, race, and religion. Unabashed and unrepentant, they were fueled by prejudice and impropriety. The most important things in life were the easiest targets. Everyone’s most deeply-held beliefs must be stomped to dust and shattered to pieces— except, of course, their own.

“Did he just call him a papist?” Chuck asked Orwell, who nodded.

“You were raised Catholic, you’ll die Catholic, no matter what kind of heresy dad was into,” Kenny deflected, ruffling his brother’s feathers further. In fact, a small duck had appeared in Jeffy’s hands and he was plucking it angrily.

“Hey, what are you two arguing about?” Chuck demanded.

“He’s insulting the Universal Church and the Seven Sacraments and the Holy See and...”

“This camp is full of degenerates and Protestant heretics,” Luco interjected, his lips curled.

“Good,” Chuck spat in the dust and stamped it. “To hell with the Pope and his silly hat.”

“To hell with you, ya dumb Mick. If you ever stepped into a church you’d burst into flames.”

“Maybe one of your demon churches. Eat your pickled hearts ya weirdo Guinea.”

“The weak are meat and the strong do eat,” Luco said, twirling his bag of hearts on his finger.

“What about you, gay boy?” Chuck looked to Orwell.

“I’m good on the, ehrm, pickled animal hearts.”

“No, I mean who do you rep? Scientology or something?”

Orwell rolled his eyes and shrugged. “I don’t do labels, honey-buns.”

Chuck shivered and recoiled. Orwell in fact considered himself pansexual, but knew exactly how much feyness to affect to dazzle or horrify the sort of mediocres and squares that surrounded his fabulous existence.

“You know, I’m tired of the snaps and jibes. The world may be broken, but we can make it anew, and the Church is still out there and in us. There ought to be an official faith to this camp to keep us on track,” Luco half-joked.

“Damn right. We take it to a vote and we’ll find out who the real God is.”

Orwell blinked at them incredulously, his amused smirk twisting into a straight line. “You guys are joking, right? You can’t just decide the whole religion for the camp. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Luco examined his nails. “We’re the warrior caste. Xavier can’t deny our requests.”

Orwell sighed. “Let’s just finish this little exchange then. The books are just at my tent.”

Chuck shook his head. “We’ll do that later. Have to go get this sorted out. Figure out where you stand with God, boys. Your souls are at stake.” And he walked away.

Luco stood there with Orwell staring at him. “What’re you looking at me for? I was going to let him pay for it.” And Luco disappeared too, like a cat between the trees.

Orwell turned to the two kids that had started it all. “Now what on earth are you two on about?”

“He’s besmirching the church!” “He’s worshiping false idols!” they both shouted in a blur of accusations.

“I suspect you’re using this unusual argument as a proxy for unrelated problems,” Orwell divined.

The brothers looked at each other searchingly. “I didn’t even start it,” Kenny said. “He’s always accusing me of random stuff.”

“You’re always *doing* random bad stuff!”

Kenny shrugged. “See what I’m dealing with? I’m just an honest hunter doing my part for my people, and the blessed church of St. Peter.”

“You don’t pray or confess and you haven’t brought a single deer home! You’re being confusing!”

“I got some rabbits and squirrels! And a woodpecker! I just couldn’t find it after I blasted it out of that tree...”

Orwell smacked his two giant, dusty books together. “Silence!”

They looked at him.

“Now you two are either arguing about nothing, or you’re arguing about *something,* and it isn’t whatever it is you’re arguing about.”

Kenny looked to his brother. “Is he right?”

“Well... maybe. It’s kinda gay that you spend so much time out with Mike instead of me,” Jeffy admitted. “I mean, I’m your brother! I almost got killed. You never even asked me about it!”

“I was there. It was messed up. I figured you got over it.”

Jeffy turned red. “Of course I’m over it! Whatever, asshole butthole dingus bitch.” And he marched back into the tent.

Kenny looked at Orwell and shrugged, walking off while poking holes in the socks with his knife to turn them into mittens.

Orwell sighed. “Oh, to be brothers.” And he walked over to Delton, who was outside of his tent, reading the last pages of *1984.* “How do you like it? I wrote it, you know.”

Delton closed it. “Seems the proles don’t care much for literature.”

Orwell looked at the two big books in his arm. “Unfortunately not. Everyone around camp could benefit a lot from an hour of reading a day.”

“Think of what a flatscreen and surround-sound could do.”

“I’m sure you’d charge by the hour.”

“By the minute,” Delton joked or didn’t-joke. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here for a deal with the capitalist devil. The two lesser of the Boogie Boys might make a stink about their religious persuasions. If it really came to a vote, I’d like our camp’s banner to be one that embraces everyone. It’d even be good for business.”

Delton stroked his chin. “I’m a merchant, not a priest.”

“Still, I’m sure you could figure something out. I’ve got half a dozen *Playboys* in it for you.”

Delton’s ears pricked. “What’re we talking about?”

“All 90s, primo stuff. And a few *Penthouses* you could divide up for the necessary bribes. I’ve even got stuff to make the ladies tingle.”

“All that for a joke vote?”

“It’s good to keep the peace. And I like to have a little fun too.”

Delton hummed and thought for a while. “What did you have in mind?”

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The next day was odd because nothing had changed, except that Orwell was standing proudly beneath a homemade flag with the Unitarian Universalist Association on a rainbow background under a thirty foot flagpole that Augustus had inexplicably installed during the night. It waved proudly in the breeze, the clang of the metal clip hitting off the pole music to his ears.

Charlie had reluctantly agreed to call an all-persons vote on the official religion of the camp at the behest of virtually everyone. Even more surprising, the vast majority of votes were in agreement. Their bags stuffed with bribes, they had all agreed that Unitarian Universalism was the one true way, ironically meaning that all ways were the one true way. None of them cared, of course. It was the best bribery any of them had ever taken part in.

Luco and Chuck were the only ones who seemed to care. Even Kenny and Jeffy shrugged as they walked by it, ignoring each other conspicuously. Luco stood, arms crossed, staring at it unhappily. Chuck was seething and thrashing, as usual, shouting and humming curses in a language only he understood.

“I don’t get it,” Penelope said. “I thought we were supposed to be atheists.” She was standing with Grace wrapped prettily around her arm, just in front of Orwell.

“We’re anarchists, not Stalinists. Be whatever you want to be, but be happy!”

“I think it’s wonderful,” Grace said.

“But what do Unitarians even believe? Aren’t they like some type of hippie-dippie Christians or something?” Penelope asked.

“No idea,” Orwell admitted, “but no one else knows either. I was going to go with Buddhism, but then I don’t think I could have gotten away with a rainbow on the flag.”

“You could have put a rainbow pentagram on the flag with all that porn you bribed everyone with. Why’d you hold out on us like that?”

“I wouldn’t dare to tarnish our sex lives like that, my sweets,” he winked, and they laughed and kissed. Most of the camp watched, wide-eyed, then ran back to their tents, flustered.

“I’m just happy that everything’s okay right now,” Grace said to her friends. The three stood in each other’s arms, soaking in the peace and love in the air.

### 26 - The night attack

*A week later...*

It was a dark and dreary night, where the cold soaked into one’s bones. Those sleeping tossed and turned, and those who kept watch shivered where they stood, waiting for the distant light of morning.

Beckett was on sentry duty for that night as usual. While the cold was oppressive, he knew what to wear and how to wear it so he didn’t suffer so much. He tugged his scratchy mil-surp facemask up and dug his hands into his waistband for warmth. He was thankful his hands were free now that he got a sling for his shotgun from Delton.

That shotgun that a few weeks ago he didn’t even know how to load more than one shell into... Lyle had shown him how, one-upping him and educating him in one fell blow, like everyone always seemed to be doing, like his dad always did. He couldn’t say “fuck you,” but he wouldn’t say “thank you,” either. He’d just have to do better. So he kept his eyes sharp tonight.

The camp was quiet as he patrolled around it, vague outlines of tents appearing in moonlight like the shapes of great sleeping beasts, occasionally illuminated by the flicker of his flashlight if he lost his bearings. He knew there were other watches about and encountered them occasionally and exchanged quiet words. Inevitably the eerie remembrance came, that they must separate and to cover all of the perimeter. Each cold watchman soon missed the company.

Beckett didn’t know exactly how many watches were out with him because the Boogie Boys did theirs independently, and the Kids did too, but refused to coordinate with the others. Mike and Xavier allowed this, because they showed extreme prowess and dedication, climbing deftly up trees or disappearing into makeshift blinds and staying there for hours, never being caught slacking or asleep on duty.

He had just run into Cook, who took up watch only occasionally, and who kindly handed him a bad joke and a crumbly biscuit then went back to sit in a bush and wait for intruders they prayed would never come.

So Beckett was surprised when he discerned a tall shape in front of him just on the treeline. He knew the night played tricks on one’s eyes, but as he snuck closer and quieter, he became convinced this was real, and shouldered his shotgun.

“Turkey!” he challenged the ghost in the shadows.

“Vulture,” it answered. “You’re in my section, idiot.”

“Who is that?”

“Who’s you?” She stalked over to him, her face becoming clearer in a ray of moonlight, stern and handsome like something semi-divine. “Oh, you’re the cop kid.”

She was a giant of a girl despite being only a few inches taller than him. The dark amplified that effect, and the strength of her voice and person seemed to fill all the cold night air around them with warmth and strength. She held an AK against her pelvis with one hand, pointed in the air, its barrel running parallel with the scar on her face.

“I-I forgot your name,” he stuttered.

“Penelope.” She sighed. “Call me Pel. Less syllables to whisper in the dark.”

“I’m Beckett.”

She nodded and turned away from the moonlight to look back toward the infinite stretch of forest ahead. He felt nervous because she didn’t seem especially interested in chatting, but he felt stuck in her gravity now, with no recourse but to talk.

“I wasn’t a cop. I was just aiming to.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I guess that’s better than the real thing.”

“What? You don’t like ‘em?”

“Not particularly, and maybe even less so the folks that wanna try to be them. You folks don’t tend to treat my people well.”

“Right, you’re Native,” he remembered someone mentioning.

“Yeah, but I was talking about white folks in general.” She winked in the darkness.

He was silent.

“I’m kidding, man. I’m only half, and raised in-town, so inside I’m about as white as the rest of you. Why’d you want to join the cops though?”

Beckett’s brain jammed up like it always did when he thought about that. “I wanted to protect people, do good for the community, be my best self.”

“And you were gonna do that writing traffic tickets and busting kids for weed?”

“That’s not all it is. You know, some day I wanted to be a detective, a supervisor, maybe chief. Who knows?”

Pel shook her head slowly. “Power, power. It’s all about power.”

Beckett came a little closer. “Power isn’t bad. It’s how you use it.”

“Power corrupts.”

“Power challenges you.” He said it as surely and readily as anything, but they weren’t really his words.

“So did you have family in it or did you pick that up from a pamphlet?”

Beckett felt somewhat like he’d been found out, discovered, *seen*. He hated that feeling, but he hated more that something about her made his cards on the table: “Granddad retired a captain. Dad wanted to follow his steps, but... life got complicated, so he went a different way.”

“Doubt he was happy about that, huh?”

“No, he wasn’t. Became a trucker instead.”

She scoffed. “There you have it. Daddy wanted to be granddaddy, and you wanted to live daddy’s dreams for him. It’s the circle of life. The system perpetuates.”

Beckett felt suddenly defensive. “What was your goal then?”

“What do I wanna do when I grow up? Hmm, let’s see. I want a big garden to feed the whole community and show others how to grow. I want to write, read at least a book a day. I want a dozen cats and one dog who just barely get along, and I want to put up walls— not just sheetrock, I mean start to finish, smooth and painted. Oh, and I want to subvert society’s moral conventions, smash the patriarchy, and bring about a classless, stateless world with justice for all.”

“So you’re a revolutionary.”

“See, that’s my whole problem with summing up people in one title, one job. You wanna be a cop not because of all that crap you fed me, but because it gives you status, resources, *power,* and because it would make your pops proud.*”*

“I don’t want power,” he said unsurely.

She sniffed. “Then what did you want? Skills? Security? You wanted to know about everything. Criminals, crime, good people, bad people. You wanted to know about cars, guns, karate, justice. Kicking ass and saving the day.”

“Yeah. I wanted to help.”

She waved her finger dismissively. “No, you want to *be* the one who helps. That’s not action, that’s identity. You want to be the one that everyone looks up to when everything’s going wrong, and then finally, because you have all the answers, you can be secure in yourself.”

Beckett was repulsed at this sort of exposure. Who did she think she was, that she knew him from a look at him— no, not even a look, because it was dark? Yet she thought she could see into him, and he didn’t like what she saw. His head dropped miserably.

She seemed to sense this and drew a deep breath. “Look, maybe I’m just talking shit, but if you mean what you say, that you wanna help people, maybe a job that regularly puts you side by side with the town prosecutor, throwing poors in the slammer, isn’t the best idea. Sometimes the best way to do something good is to just do it. And if you want to know all the stuff you think makes you a big, strong man, just learn it. It’s more commendable that way anyway.”

“And then what? Work as a private detective? Mall cop? Run a paintball shop? What would anyone do with me then? I’d be useless.”

“Our jobs don’t define us. What’s wrong with a guy that knows how to be a cop choosing to be something else? A paramedic becoming an anarchist?”

Beckett looked around. The moon was lighting on them both. “I don’t know if you noticed, but suddenly fighters are in high demand now. We all got drafted by reality.”

Pel sighed. “And the poets have to carry guns.”

“Not the first time it’s happened, I’m sure. Hey— paramedic, anarchist?”

Pel nodded. “That’s me.”

“You were a paramedic?”

“My dad was. He did everything to make sure I was too.”

“But you never actually worked as one?”

Pel laughed. “I could still recite the whole protocol book. What would *you* do if someone went into asystole in front of you? A 50 year old woman with family?”

Beckett struggled to remember what *asystole* even meant. “I... I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re in the middle of a grocery store, no one else knows what to do. You start CPR and keep going until the ambulance arrives. You know what it feels like doing ten minutes of real CPR?”

Beckett shook his head.

“It’s the hardest you’ll ever work. Your arms ache. You’re pouring sweat. Your brain just tries to keep on beat, keep the next compression coming. Ever seen a dead body?”

Beckett swallowed, nodded.

“Ever kill someone?”

“...No.”

“Only thing that might fuck with you more is when you’re the only one keeping someone’s blood pumping and they die anyway. Especially when it’s your grandma.”

“Your grandma...?”

“Yeah. And it wasn’t a grocery store. It was Route 95. Her heart stopped on the road and we went into a guardrail doing 90.” She tapped the scar that ran from her jaw to her hair. “My face went through the window, almost took my eye out, broke my ankle, some ribs... but kids are resilient, you know? And adrenaline...”

“Wait... I know this... my dad told me... That was you?!”

She turned away “Yeah... everyone thinks they know the story.”

“You crawled out the window...”

“...And pulled her onto the road. No pulse, so I did what a good medic does and started CPR.”

“That was you?! You were only ten.”

“Twelve. Practically a teenager, which means practically an adult, right?” She snickered sadly.

“Everyone talked about it for years. You were a legend!”

“To everyone except my dad, apparently. You’d think that would be enough for one lifetime, or at least one childhood, but when we were at Grandma’s wake... looking at her broken face they’d pieced back together, she looked like a porcelain doll with makeup... It should have been closed-casket... Both our faces had been smashed up. Why would they make me look at her like that?”

She smacked the tree next to her. Beckett reached out for her, but she swatted him away.

“I looked at her there and wondered if I could’ve done better, pushed harder to save her. Normal thoughts for a kid, right? But my dad must have been thinking the same thing. He doubled down on the medic shit, tripled down after my mom left. It was *her* mom, but somehow *he* couldn’t let it go. The town ambulance needed faster response times, the doctors should’ve caught it— whatever *it* was. No change wasn’t enough for him.”

“I remember... the paramedic who wanted to reform everything...”

“Yeah. My mom didn’t want a crusade, she just wanted to move on. He wouldn’t, and she left. He wouldn’t drop it with the town, so they canned him. He opened his own EMT school so he could teach his students to be the best. And there I was for years, helping with classes, not sure if I was a teacher or student, but knowing I was supposed to be the best.”

They both felt like ghosts were crawling up their backs. “And that’s it?” Beckett asked.

“No. Then I discovered weed and acid and chicks. I discovered Marx and Tolstoy and Bakunin and Kropotkin and Nestor Makhno. I might be almost blind in one eye, but the other sees just fine. I found out I didn’t have to be something I didn’t wanna be.”

Beckett rubbed his neck. “Just like that?”

“No, idiot, I’m skipping half a decade of fighting and running away and figuring out who I wanted to be. It’s never easy to choose, but it’s more painful not to.” She turned around and her eyes glittered in the moonlight, the scar cutting a line between them. “Now, who do *you* want to be?”

“I...”

“Don’t tell me. Tell yourself. Pick. Pick every day and don’t tell anyone. Let your actions speak for you.” She turned back to the trees. “The only person responsible for you is you. Not parents, not excuses.”

Beckett struggled to find something to say for a while, until he figured he should just be quiet. But he needed to say just one thing. “Hey...”

“Shh!” she hushed. “Did you hear that?

\*\*\*

Jack was up in his favorite tree his friends called “the Beanstalk.” He didn’t like staying in one place for long, but there was something about this tree that was comforting. It was high up and gave the perfect vantage. He was starting to understand how Ozy had spent so much time up in one of these.

There were at least four other sentries tonight, three from the main camp and one from those assholes in black. This didn’t even count Tac and Smoke, the two living shadows he knew were out there hiding and watching always. There were far too many people on watch, he knew, but he didn’t trust any but his own. The older people here just didn’t seem to understand how precarious their sedentary lifestyle was in a world starving for food and blood.

But the real adults were gone, and even they would have just made a mess of things. Now the kids they left behind were pretending to be adults and making their own messes. It was insanity to trust anyone but your own people, and even they could fail. If you want something done right...

Below him the barest flicker of movement caught his eye and halted his thoughts. He immediately took hold of the free rope in his left hand and lowered himself down as quickly and quietly as he could via the pulley system he was tied into, his .22 cradled in his arm. Every ten feet he would meet a knot in the rope and slip his carabiner below it to descend the next stretch.

“Hey! Turkey!” he called the code word out hushedly. “Hey!”

Movements seemed to continue sporadically. Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

He stopped and sat on a limb 20 feet off the ground. “Stop or I'll shoot!”

Everything was quiet. He sat for a solid minute and began to wonder if his senses weren’t as sharp as he thought. “Eagle Eyes,” his sister and friends called him, half-joking as they always were. Good thing they weren’t around. They’d never let him live this down.

He suddenly felt very exposed in his tree. “Better look around and find a different spot,” he thought, unclipping his carabiner from the rope. Suddenly a lightning bolt cracked as if through his heart, and his hand slipped from the rope. The whole world fell from him and he fell from the whole world— great punches of pain and fear, and then nothing but darkness.

\*\*\*

Lyle dreamt of dead men’s faces. At the last, one pulled up its rifle— a .22, it was always a .22 now— and shot him between the eyes.

He woke up sitting, shivering and panting. He breathed deep and long, trying to calm down, listening to the night till he heard a noise. He threw on his AUG and his thickest coat, a plundered Carhartt, and snuck outside.

The sounds seemed to be coming from anywhere. Laughing or crying, he couldn’t tell. He closed his eyes and followed his ears to Kimmy and Jace’s tent. The noise continued but grew only more confusing. He didn’t want to bother them if they were... preoccupied, but he worried something was wrong.

Suddenly Jace’s head popped out of the tent, and he proceeded to get out as if he didn’t see Lyle there. Barefooted, he started taking a piss a few feet from his tent. Lyle waited till he was zipping his pants then quietly hailed him.

Jace launched up into the air like a Looney Tunes character and skittered back into his tent, zipping the door shut. Only after a minute of dead silence did it slowly unzip and his head appear again.

“Jace?”

“Whosat?”

“It’s Lyle. What’s the matter with you? Are you on meth or something?”

Jace chuckled sinisterly, sucked his head back in like a turtle, and then a hand stuck out of the tent, bearing something. Lyle came and looked closer, but couldn’t see and shone his flashlight on it briefly. A baggie full of little shriveled mushrooms.

Jace retracted his hand swiftly. “Turn that off! You want the aliens to spot our crock of gold?”

“Where did you get those?”

“Orwell traded 'em for a song and a dance. I thought we were getting burned, but the truth of the matter is so much more.”

“You can’t be tripping on shrooms during the apocalypse, dude.”

Jace stuck his top half out the flap and fell to the ground, swirling then swirled his hands toward Lyle. “That’s what you... the centurions are for.”

Lyle went to say something but noticed Kimmy lying in the tent, staring up at the ceiling with a look of awe. “Hi Kimmy.”

“Hey Lyle.”

“Ain’t she a crystal gem?” Jace looked back at her worshipfully, his eyes watering a little.

Lyle knelt down. “Look man, enjoy yourself, but we gotta be on the ready if-”

A gunshot rang out nearby. They all silenced and waited.

“Wait here. I’ll check it out.”

Lyle zipped up their door and ran in the direction of the sound. A body came from around a tent corner and caught him up by his collar. He thrashed as his hands searched for his gun’s handle and trigger.

“Easy! It’s me,” Spencer shouted. Another shot went off nearby and the night erupted in scattered cracks and explosions in many directions, some closer than others. Spencer seemed unaffected. “Get your people in the game! Put most of them on the east side and your best on the south and west.” Lyle looked at him confusedly and Spencer growled and rolled his eyes. “East! South! West!” he pointed with his fingers, smacked Lyle on the back and ran off.

“My best?” Lyle stood there looking every which way, waiting for things to make sense. They didn’t. He’d have to make sense of them.

He ran to the main tent and found the door already open, Jeffy peeking out. “What’s going on?”

“It’s an attack! Get to the... where’s your brother and Beckett?”

“Beckett’s on watch. I don’t know about Kenny.”

“Fuck. Then, uh... uhh... go west. That way. Shoot anything coming into camp.”

“Anything?”

“I don’t know. Use your imagination.”

Jerry was the only other one in the tent. Jeffy looked back at him sadly and ran off with his .22 rifle.

Lyle looked to make sure he was gone and caught his breath. “Jerry, you’re all I got to watch the south. That’s in-between both sides. You’ve got to hold it. Someone’ll be there soon to back you up.”

Jerry stood up and went past him. “Jerry will help.”

Lyle tried to shove his 1911 in Jerry’s hands, but by the time he unholstered it, Jerry had disappeared. Lyle yelled helplessly for him until the sounds of battle made him move again. The camp was scattered with lights and blurry silhouettes rushing to and fro. Flashlight beams cut through the dark like pikes clashing toward the sky, dazing him and ruining his ability to see in the dark.

Suddenly Lyle ran into someone and they both toppled over. “Mike?! What’s going on?”

“We’re getting hit from every side. Spence filled me in. The Chads already set up west with your boy Jeffy, though there’s no commotion from that way... yet.”

“We need people south. Jerry’s down there alone and he... he doesn’t even fight.”

“Diana and Gavin are already on it. That’s where their tent is.” Mike said. “Where are the rest of your guys?”

“Beckett’s on watch somewhere and...” Lyle looked toward Kimmy and Jace’s tent. “I’m getting the others now.”

“Make it fast. We don’t know where they’re coming from or how many we’re dealing with. And we’ve got people out there. Kenny’s out there.”

“Kenny, why?!”

“Coon-hunting. Don’t you worry about him.”

“Fuck. Fuck, man.”

“Keep your shit together. If we lose it, everyone else will too.” Mike turned away to run east, but Lyle caught him by the shoulder.

“Mike, who’s watching the north side?”

“North? That’s the pond. It’s our only impasse.”

“Mike, what if they swim it?”

“...Get up there with your other people, pronto. I’ll send whoever I can.”

He disappeared and Lyle ran north, stopping at Kimmy and Jace’s tent, unzipping and poking his head in. A gun barrel poked him in the throat. “Woah!”

“Lyle?!” The weapon withdrew and the two crawled out of the shadows at the corner of their tent. “What’s going on?”

“Someone’s attacking us. It could be big. Everyone’s out there.”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” Kimmy said.

“Stay here and keep your weapons ready. I don’t know what’s coming.”

“I’m coming with you!” Jace said. “We’re warrior gods. We’ll die together. In battle!”

Lyle shined his flashlight on Jace and saw the determined look in his dilated black eyes. He also noticed Kimmy’s AR-15 he was holding wasn’t in battery. He reached behind and clicked the bolt release, readying the gun with a loud snap. “Stay and guard the women and children.”

Jace looked back at Kimmy, who stared at the floor, forlorn and terrified.

“Don’t shoot anyone, but don’t let anyone shoot you.” Lyle got up and kept turning back wanting to say more, but couldn’t find words for his indisposed friends.

He ran north toward the water, when he saw outgoing gunshots 20 feet off to his left. His heart jumped into his throat and he ran toward it, slamming down to the ground next to Beckett, who had Penelope’s AK in his hand and his shotgun across his lap.

“Fuck’s going on?”

“We’re pinned here, Pel— Penelope’s hit,” Beckett pointed.

“It’s not bad,” a pain-filled voice said a few feet away. “Just splinters maybe. No tourniquet on.”

“We’ve gotta get her back,” Beckett whispered. “If they push...”

“No! I’m not out of the fight yet! They need us here!”

“Goddamnit, cover me.” Lyle ran over to her as Beckett let out small bursts with her AK. “Let me see.” He shined his flashlight and saw small bleeds over her arms and under her shirt. Her left thigh was drenched in shining fresh blood that wet the dirt and leaves beneath. “Jesus. This is ‘not bad’?”

“Hey, still conscious. Must’ve missed the artery,” she grinned, gnashing her teeth. He noticed a medical pouch and empty pipettes next to her and an old Makarov pistol in her hand.

“What’re you gonna do with that?” he asked, ripping open bandages and taping them over the smaller wounds.

“What a billion other poor bastards have done: hold the line. Only got four mags for it. Ammo’s hard to come by, ya know? Maybe I’ll use 'em all tonight.”

He patted her shoulder and she winced— another wound there. “Let’s hope not.”

“Hey guy... Why haven’t they pushed in?”

Lyle was pulling out a splinter of wood from her forearm and wondered if she meant that. “What do you mean?”

“They surrounded us, they’re close, it sounds like they have a lot of people. Why haven’t they already overrun camp...” she grunted as the splinter came out. “...shooting us all in the back?”

“Maybe we’re holding them off. We set up a perimeter quick.”

She laughed.

“Lyle!” Beckett’s voice was drowned in a hail of gunfire. “Over there!”

Lyle turned his gun that direction, saw multiple movements, and fired till his 42rd magazine emptied. He took out the magazine and struggled to shove more rounds in from the stripper clips. Cartridges fell from his shaking hands. *Why didn’t I practice more?*

“Bring her back!” Beckett shouted, shooting into the treeline.

Lyle grabbed her by the collar and she clenched her medical bag and flailed and screamed. “No! No! Don’t take me off!”

“Shut up!” He wasn’t going to leave her for her glorious death. He got her within shouting distance of Kimmy and Jace before he started calling for them over the gunfire. It was all around them now, close and far. Kimmy and Jace emerged. “Take care of her!” he commanded.

He ran back toward Beckett and saw him running back toward him. As Beckett pulled Lyle down to the ground, an explosion blew near them. The force hit them all over like a stone wall, knocking the air out of their lungs and the sound from their ears.

Lyle felt like he was flying and wondered if he were an angel. There was only cold and the vague blurs of trees and sky rushing past his vision. Somehow he knew time had nearly ground to a halt, and the angel had to wonder if it were his last flight, his last flash of light, or if something came after.

The earth and his back collided and rattled his skull. He felt like a squashed bug in its last moment after being swatted, like his insides were all turned to crushed bones and jelly. He didn’t feel like an angel anymore. He assumed he was already dead. It didn’t come to mind how he was still able to see then.

He was looking at the dock, at the pond. He could just barely see it, the way the moonlight glittered over its surface, and how that light was interrupted by the vague forms of a dozen small boats coming straight toward shore. A blaring spotlight turned toward him, then many more, blinding him.

He turned his head and saw the dim tents and lanterns of camp. He imagined all the people who lived there, that somehow maybe they were still safe and hidden in the dark. It had been peaceful here for so long. Why did the peace have to die now?

Then the earth spat up dragons of fire that bathed the madness of war in golden light: scared bodies crouching or rushing about, angry shouts and screams, the deafening cracks of gunfire, and the enemy marching ever closer like a creature army from a nightmare. In the light, the nakedness of their whole camp was revealed, and he knew for sure they were no longer safe.

*We were never safe to begin with,* was his last thought as silence and darkness fell over him.

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“Where the fuck is our ammo?” Spencer yelled amid back-and-forth fire. Augustus was dragging it behind him on a sled piled with full magazines and ammo boxes. He was wearing full riot gear, and looked double his normal size.

Spencer marched over and replenished his vest with a few, then yanked Augustus to himself by the collar. “Where’s Delton?!”

The big man pointed north, pushed Spencer away and ran off south with the ammo sled.

“Why the fuck is Delton going north?” Spencer growled, marching to the line and throwing people to either side. “Mike, watch the left for anyone skirting up along the water. Luco, hold center. Chuck, move right. Cook can’t hold it alone. Hold this side! I have to check the others.”

Mike nodded and ran. Chuck cried out, “You kidding me?!” and Spencer kicked him til he ran off. Luco just hunkered down, silent.

Spencer turned and ran north. An explosion rang behind him, followed by a scream, but he didn’t slow or look back for even a moment.

He soon came to the dock to find Lyle on the ground, motionless. He dropped and crawled up to him, peeking his head over the body and cursing at what he saw.

Xavier came running his way. “Get down!” Spencer yelled and Xavier went down at the last. A stream of invisible bullets buzzed overhead.

Xavier slowly peeked his head up to see a small armada of boats and bright lights a minute from shore. He screamed and dug himself flat against the ground again. “Did you see that?! There’s a million of them!”

“That’s the party we’ve been waiting for. Who’d have thought, those fire fuckers coming on water.”

“How do you know it’s them?” Xavier shouted.

“Who else?” Spencer said, vainly searching through the pockets on Lyle’s vest-rig for explosives or anything useful. Lyle groaned weakly. “Ah, he’s still alive.”

“What do we do?!”

Spencer paused and thought for a moment. “I say we pull everyone south and try to break out toward the neighborhood.”

“What about the wounded?!”

Spencer grabbed Xavier’s shoulder and glared. “Think about the people who can still stand.”

Suddenly Augustus came running past them, through gunfire, toward the dock with what looked like a SAW heavy machine gun cradled in his arms. Delton was jogging just behind, a silenced Uzi slung around him. “Gentlemen, some covering fire, please.”

Xavier and Spencer opened up on the water, shooting at the lights, extinguishing one.

Then Delton set up his machine gun and joined in. The SAW opened up with Augustus feeding it ammunition from one long belt in a metal case, sweeping over the pond from side to side with a robotic motion, piercing through the aluminum and fiberglass boats. The lights from the boats soon disappeared or fell haphazard, cutting jaggedly into the dark sky. The strobing flash of the SAW and its monstrous hum were all that remained.

As the ammo belt emptied, the din was suddenly lost, but immediately a powerful rifle started sounding off from above them, high up in a tree. It was going out, hitting enemy boats with precision. Screams and cries of the wounded could be heard, echoing off the pond.

Delton finished reloading the machine gun and Augustus held up two big, bright LED spotlights, shining them all over the pond. The sight was all carnage: Nothing could be seen overtop the boats except a few bodies slumped over the edges, crimson running down the sides. A few boats were turning around slowly to limp away.

“Finish them!” Spencer yelled up to Delton.

“I’m not a butcher,” he returned, panting.

The sniper shots from above continued, cutting a savage clockwork beat into the air. The fleeing boats were poked with more holes, their engines knocked out. Wails and crying and calls of surrender echoed out. The shots continued anyway.

“Glad one one of us is,” Spencer spat, looking up toward the mysterious sniper in the tree, knowing it had to be Smoke, that contemptible little copy of his best soldier, Tacitus. He got up and stalked back toward the east line. “Now where are those damn kids at?!”

### 27 - Aftermath

Early next morning, Beckett woke to the smell of rubbing alcohol and the sound of screaming. There was a distinct impression that he may be dead, even in some sort of hell. His head pounded and his chest felt like crushed glass and rocks. It was all thankfully buried under a narcotic cloud. Everything floated and sparkled, even the pain, even the screams. He wasn’t in hell, maybe purgatory, or it was all just a dream.

“You have to hold still, Cook!” Penelope shouted, exasperated, slowly picking out fragments of metal and placing them in a shallow metal dish filled with blood and water.

“I’m trying!” he sobbed.

Beckett turned over to see them. She noticed. “You’re awake.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“You and him took a blast from a grenade or something.” She nudged her head Lyle, who was lying beside Beckett unconscious.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s stable, but he hasn’t woken up yet. Fortunately for you guys it wasn’t a frag. Cook got hit all over with little fragments, but his ankle...”

Cook screamed.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Beckett said.

“No,” Cook groaned and laughed, sweat pouring down his face. “It’s alright. It’s karma getting back at me for ringing so many chickens’ necks for you guys to eat. I’m gonna keep chipper about it, ‘cause I’ve got the best surgeon around.” He winked.

Penelope swallowed a sorrowful sigh and put on a smile. “Sure, guy. Now hold it together a little longer so I can clean you up.”

“What about the others, is anyone?-” Beckett couldn’t say the word.

She shrugged. “Everyone we know of is walking wounded. But there’s people.. unaccounted for.”

Beckett leaned his head back, and looked over to Lyle, praying he would wake up.

...

Outside, the rest were gathered, except those that were missing or searching.

“Come onnnn! You have to let me see her!” Grace was pleading with Mike outside the medical tent where the badly wounded were being treated. Orwell was next to her, holding her back.

“Pel’s the one who asked me to keep everyone away and let her focus,” Mike said. “Trust me, she’s the healthiest-looking out of all of them. She’s patching up the others!”

“But who’s going to take care of her?” Grace cried.

“Leave it, honey. He’s right,” Orwell told her and took her away from the tent.

The Boogie Boys were all in a rage. “Can’t believe those fuckers hit us,” Chuck said incredulously, leaning against a tree with one arm that he rested his head on.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Luco said coolly, arms crossed, back to a tree. “What surprises me is that we made it at all.” He looked to Spencer, who was oddly silent.

“Maybe if those fuckers hadn’t been all messed up!” Chuck smashed his fist off a tree and pointed at Kimmy and Jace accusingly. They looked strung out and distressed. “Two more people in the fight might’ve made a difference!”

“It’s just bad luck,” Diana said. “Could’ve happened to anyone.”

“You only say that ‘cause you and your degenerate boyfriend are wasted all the time.”

“Lay off, beard. No one tells me or her what to do, least of all you,” Gavin said.

“Oh yeah, big boy? Why don’t you come do something about it? Throw a knife in between us.”

“Make my day.” Gavin slapped the KA-BAR blade hanging on his belt.

“Oh good Lord,” Orwell’s eyes rolled.

“We’re sorry, okay? We thought it’d be quiet like any other night,” Jace said.

“That’s the problem. There aren’t any rules. It’s a free-for-all here. It’s a wonder we’re still alive.” Luco chimed in.

“We banded together so we could be free,” Orwell reminded them.

“Free to what? Bugger who you please? Be useless when your allies need you?”

“Please, as if any of you spooky boys care about us.”

“My very queer friend! You wound me! Why do you think we stick around except to help you fine people?” He eyed Grace, winked. “Of course, some of you are finer than others.”

“Stop fighting!” Xavier said, sitting with Rachel in his lap shaking. “We need to stick together now more than ever.”

“Like a broken record,” Chuck said.

“I have half a mind that we four should go,” Luco said.

“That would be crazy!” Xavier shouted.

“Would it? We can take care of ourselves. What about you? Maybe the crazy thing is to stay.”

“Enough!” Spencer ordered, and Luco yawned boredly and turned away.

Someone came from the woods a ways off.

“Hey! Help! Jack’s hurt!” Char shouted. She and Zane were dragging Jack by his wrists. Augustus ran and carefully picked up his unconscious body, taking him into the medical tent.

“One of you should go in with him, to tell Penelope what happened to him.”

Zane told Char to stay out there because he was the one that saw Jack first, though in truth, he just didn’t want her to see him like that. She waited by the door and started to cry. Diana came over and comforted her.

“Maybe we didn’t make off so good,” Chuck muttered.

“Chuck!” Diana scolded. “They’re just kids!”

Just behind the other three kids, Kenny came with two prisoners, hands tied behind their backs. Both couldn’t have been older than eighteen, maybe younger. One was a black kid with a scraggly afro singed in places. The other’s head was shaved, a white hand painted on his face and black flame tattoos all over both forearms, and his ribs were sunken in on his shirtless chest. He was shivering.

“Tell 'em who you are,” Kenny said, jabbing one in the back with his .22.

“Lord Brightfire sent us.”

“Firestarters, eh?” Spencer started pacing in a circle in front of them, hands held pensively behind his back. “What do you peter-puffers have against us? Against a little *civilization?* We waste one of you, two come back. Waste a few more, you double your patrols. We whack your patrols and you send an army. Maybe you missed the message: you’re just kids playing with big toys. It’ll take days for us to tally your dead but just a minute to light the pile on fire. You like fires, don’t you?”

Kenny nudged the kid again. “Tell him the rest.”

“We didn’t want to attack. Not all of us like the raids and burnings, but they make us. They make us *do* things...”

“Tough luck, gangsta. You’re reppin the wrong colors in the wrong hood and now you gotta pay.”

“Do it!” the white boy with the white hand across his face shouted. “Nothing compares to what they’ll do to you, especially now.”

“It speaks,” Spencer chuckled. “What, did Saruman send you?” He grabbed his face and turned it like he was chatel. “You’re one ugly motherfucker. No wonder you paint your face like an orc.”

The kid tried to bite him and Spencer dodged, wound his whole body back, and clocked the kid as hard as he could. The white-faced kid flew into the dirt, lying there groaning and grasping.

“Like I said, consider the score.” Spencer rubbed his knuckles.

The black kid spoke up, stuttering and terrified: “You don’t understand. The Firestarters didn’t attack alone. They had help from The Hands, where he’s from-”

“Shut it, fuckhead,” the kid on the ground muttered. He lifted his head, the painted hand partly erased by dirt.

“-they’re building a coalition, the Confederacy, they call it. The big raider clans are coming together-”

“Quiet!”

“Now they’ll come down on you all at once. Oh God, I don’t wanna be here, I just wanna go home! I’m sorry! I’ll tell you anything, do anything!-”

The kid on the ground rose up suddenly with a knife and plunged a long slender blade into his comrade’s stomach. Half the group drew their guns, but it was Spencer who shot the white-faced one through the chest. He slammed to the ground with a thud, dead instantly.

The afro boy slumped to his side, screaming and writhing in pain. Spencer shot him too, twice, till he stopped moving.

A shrill cry went out, though you couldn’t tell who it came from. The camp was frozen in horror.

“You killed them,” Kenny said.

“I shot dead people. Simple as that.” He lifted his black mask with the white skull over his face. It seemed to grin at them.

“We could have saved them, given them some kinda trial,” Gavin added.

“Murderers don’t get trials.”

“We could’ve asked them how they knew where to find us, where camp was!” Kenny said, angered.

“How they found us?!” Spencer exclaimed. “They drew a dot for every patrol of theirs we killed or sent running, then found a big empty circle in the middle, right where our happy little community is. Let’s talk about how they took us by surprise, how half the camp wasn’t in fighting shape when the enemy came down on us.”

“We did good, all things considered, Spence. Most of us were in defensive positions before they started hitting hard,” Mike explained plaintively.

“Sounds like luck to me,” he dismissed. “We’ve survived so far in spite of ourselves. That’s enough of that. You heard our little buddy here,” he kicked the side of one of the bodies. “The enemy is coming back in bigger numbers. From here on out, we’re on lockdown. We live like soldiers or die like fools. If you don’t like it, find a different camp, get slaughtered there in the dead of night.”

Most of them looked to their leader Xavier, whose eyes were full of tension and fear.

“And if the lot of you have a problem with that,” Spencer continued, “then me and my boys will go our own way and watch the smoke rise up from camp when all hell lets loose. And we’ll be sittin’ pretty. You wanna lose your best fighters?”

Xavier knew he had to say something. “We have to stick together.” The others were afraid.

“You aren’t the best fighters,” Char said.

Spencer turned to her.

“Smoke’s the best. She was out there watching when they came. She killed a ton of them quietly from up in the trees. That’s why they took so long to attack. Your other friend was too, the one in all black.”

“Tacitus?” Spencer laughed. “No one sees him unless he wants to be seen. He’s a ghost.”

“Smoke sees him. Smoke can.”

Spencer snorted, sucked up a giant loogy and spat. “This is your elite, everybody. Delusional snot-nosed kids we barely know, who were living off scraps and stolen chickens before we forced them to come in... Our newest interracial couple, too stoned to pick up a rifle. Two drunks-” he pointed to Gavin and Diana— “two fudds—” then Mike and Kenny, “a couple of barbecuers and rich boys... Am I missing anyone?”

No one said anything.

He looked finally at Rachel and shook his head. “We’re in sorry shape, my gentle friends. If you want to keep living your degenerate lives, you’ll have to earn the right with a knife in your teeth and a gun in your hands. Them’s the breaks.” He looked at Chuck and Luco and let out a huge chestful of air. “Strip and pile the bodies. Look for more dead and wounded. Collect the weapons. We’re gonna need them.” He spun on his heel and went back toward his tent. Everyone was silent, looking bitterly at the two dead guys in front of them.

“We’ve gotta stick together,” Xavier muttered to himself.

### 28 - Something’s gotta give

Unseen eyes beamed through the forest, watching over three men in all black, shouting by a pile of half a dozen bodies. They looked like grim reapers flocking around the slain, a mirage of nightmare figures standing around the dead. But their strained voices showed them to be no more than human.

“We have to contact the Queen before they get here,” Luco said, his back against a tree. He was the only one with a lowered voice. “The orders to attack Camp couldn’t have come down from her.”

“No one’s going away from Camp,” Spencer reiterated. “Especially you two. Don’t think I don’t know what you did. I wanted to look you in the eyes when I told you. You bastard scumbag punks.”

Chuck lunged forward, swinging his fist. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I know you went around my back to the Confederates. You think you have what it takes to lead? You’re grunts. Peons. You get everything you have from me. Without me, you’d just be another pair of raiders, dying in an ambush for one of those dress-up-playing warlords. You think you can take my plans from me? You think you can take my gun out of my hands?”

Spencer threw up his AR as if for them to take.

Luco looked at it with a poisonous glare. “If you think that we betrayed you-”

“I know it.”

“If you thought that, why’re we standing here... alive?”

“Because I need someone to show the Queen. You’re taking responsibility for this.”

Luco and Chuck shifted tensely, ready to draw.

“Before you get any ideas, you know where Tac stands. With me. Watching.”

“I can get you before she gets me,” Luco said.

“You really believe that?”

Luco’s shoulders dropped. He grit his teeth. Chuck was stupidly looking around the trees.

“That’s right. I know you cowards value your skin more than anything. You think you’ll pull another one over on me, get out of this somehow with the Queen, but you’re getting marched there now with your hands tied. So drop your weapons if you want another second of life.”

Tacitus’ crosshair hovered secretly over Luco’s heart. Luco was the faster gun. There’d be no problem taking him and Chuck before they could pull on Spencer. But it took all his focus to be ready for a shot on two of his own, two of the best.

It was this idea that was formed in his head, half image and half thought, as he felt a prick in his neck. Practiced in keeping perfectly still, he slowly moved his hand over it and felt the dart there. His humanity crept over him, and warmth, numbness, blindness. He couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t help but be reminded of hide and seek. He smiled.

In the clearing, the other three Boogie Boys stood silently.

“Quietly, or do you want to walk with your hands blown off?” Spencer prodded them, fingers tightening on his gun.

Luco was receiving a message in his ear, his fingers pressed against his comm headset. “Well boss, you always got a handle on things, don’t you?”

“That’s right. Now drop 'em.”

“But if we’re really just goons, why’d you keep us around for so long? All part of the plan, or did you just enjoy the company?”

“Drop 'em.”

“Guess we’ll never really know.” Luco pointed behind Spencer.

His eyes reached for the back of his head, but he knew he couldn’t turn around. If it was a feint, they would draw in that split second. If someone somehow was already there...

He didn’t have time to think of that. They would have to die and Tacitus would make it so in an instant. He raised his rifle, expecting them to be dead in half the time it would take him to even point it their way.

But to his surprise, it was he that hit the ground with the short, muffled puff-sound of a silenced shot from behind.

Chuck ran over and handcuffed him, gagged him and turned him over to see Luco standing above, a slight grin over his shadowed face.

### 29 - Gunshots and screams

Lyle woke to gunshots and screams. He was in a nightmare for sure, though he didn’t know how he knew that, nor did it diminish the quality of its pure evilness.

The world was a rumbling, exploding blur of black and white, cut through by innumerable terrible sounds. In that thought, an idea came into form: a blade in his hand by which he cut through the plastic canopy enclosing him like some monstrous womb full of bad things.

The familiar sight of woods raced past him like a looped moving cartoon background, as if it were the last and only scape that ever existed and ever would exist. Carried by ethereal feet and the passing-by of trees, he put space behind him, between him and the danger-sounds back there, nowhere, finding himself cast into a sort of infinity, a forest of nothing, where sense and meaning were just out of reach, where pain was everywhere but took no sure form, where no purpose or reason was clear.

Only one thing was clear: it was imperative to run endlessly on feet that never seemed to touch the ground, to fly away forever like a dark cloud in a rushing current, threatening always to break away, to fall to pieces, to become nothing, to become one with the chaos.

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Lyle woke shivering on the ground, wrapped in hurt, his body drained of strength. Suddenly, he thrashed and flailed and clawed at his eyes. There was a bug in his brain and it was eating him alive. He tore at it, trying to sunder his head in two halves. His finger dug into his skull. His hair must have come out in tufts.

Then it all stopped. A little black thing fell from his head and a little blood trickled down on it in droplets and made him remember warmth.

He wiped an eye without thinking and it stung. His head hurt. Everything hurt.

He knelt over the bug, picked it up. Hard, jagged. All he could think was, *it bit me!* *The little bastard...*

But it was just metal shrapnel that had embedded itself in his head.

He ran his fingers through his hair, as if still searching for alien parasites or pulverized bits of skull. His hair hadn’t come out in tufts at least, and there was nothing else there but scabbed-over cuts and dried blood.

Why was he here? How was he hurt? How long had he wandered? What was real in this flurry of horrors?

*The explosion.* He knew an explosion had flung him into the blackness of sleep and the greyness of now. He had to get back to wherever it happened.

But his brain was all mush. The bug had eaten it. So he wandered again.

### 30 - Betrayed!

Luco and Chuck strutted back into Camp with smiles they could hardly conceal. They stopped beside Jack, said something to him quietly, and Jack took his sister Char and his friend Zane and walked off into the woods.

Mike eyed them suspiciously as he picked the pockets of a dead raider with Kenny. “They’re up to something.”

Orwell and Delton were beside, casting lots over dead men’s things and holding their own sideline discussion. “You’re right,” Orwell agreed, “But what?”

Delton tossed his dice and lost to Orwell. He smilelessly handed over two full AR mags he’d hoped to plunder. “I don’t like betting without all the information,” he confided. “Makes me uneasy.”

“Well, you may have to soon. Something big’s coming our way. Something’s got to give.”

“Bigger than an all-out attack on Camp?” Mike thought aloud. They all went silent. “I don’t trust them boys in black anymore.”

“As if anyone ever did,” Orwell scoffed.

“They could be listening right now,” Delton reminded them.

“See, that’s what I’m sick of,” Mike said, barely lowering his voice. “We’re supposed to be one unit, one of the few places with both stability *and* freedom. Last bastion of democracy or something, you know? But we live in fear of saying the wrong thing or them leaving. I saw we were just fine without 'em.”

“But Xavier is still on their side.”

“Sure, Xavier just wants to keep the boat from rocking too much.”

“Me too. Are we wrong for that?”

“It’s wrong if he forgets the freedom part. It’s wrong if he lets them walk all over him... all over us.”

Delton sighed and took out a cigarette, pondered it, lit it up. He never smoked. “Freedom is overrated. Besides, who will stand up if Xavier won’t? There’s few leaders among us.”

Orwell and Mike both had the same thought and looked toward the sick tent where Lyle was.

“I just hope he wakes up,” Mike said for both of them.

Suddenly, Jace and Kimmy burst into Camp from watch duty, panting and pouring sweat, looking pale. “We gotta go.”

“Go? What do you mean?” Luco asked, as if he were in charge.

“There’s an even bigger group coming... they’re gonna attack again!” Kimmy exclaimed.

Murmurs went up through Camp.

“Are you sure? How many?”

“I don’t know. Dozens. You think we’re playing a prank?”

Luco and Chuck just looked at each other knowingly, readying their weapons.

“We got maybe 5 minutes. Where are the others? Where’s Spencer and the kids?”

“They’re preoccupied,” Chuck laughed.

“I can’t find Gavin,” Diana’s voice peeped through the scrambling tent, weaker than anyone had ever heard it. She was usually so loud and strong. “He’s not at our tent. He’s not in the wine house. I can’t find him anywhere.”

“He’s probably passed out in some ditch,” Chuck joked.

“Why are you smiling? Why are you laughing? Please, I need to find him. Someone help, please...”

Laramie dashed into their midst from the opposite direction that Jace and Kimmy had come, with Chadwick hot on his heels. “Yo, mad people on the way.”

“Like, a whole army,” Chadwick agreed. Then they fell to their knees for breath, nearly in unison.

“Not without the others,” Xavier stood up from Rachel and Ozy.

“Spencer isn’t coming back,” Luco said, and a silence fell briefly over them all.

“...What do you mean?” Xavier eyeballed him.

“It means you two aren’t the top dogs anymore. And we’re not running. The Confederacy’s coming here now... to welcome us with open arms.”

“What are you... You betrayed us? To a bunch of raiders?”

“It’s the right decision. The one you and Spencer were too stupid to make. This isn’t Treetops and Tree Forts. You have to make ugly choices.”

“By making a deal with the enemy behind our backs? And the attack... Cook is the tent with his ankle blown apart! Lyle might not wake up!”

“The transition was supposed to go more smoothly. You can thank Spencer and Tac for turning it into a bloodbath. But they’re both taken care of now. It’ll be a seamless transition into safer hands. They’re not all raiders. There’s people there trying to *make* something. Something real. Not playing in the woods.”

“You betray us and you expect the whole camp to just go along with it?” Xavier fists shook with anger.

“I expect you to sit down and shut up if you know what’s good for you and your junkie girlfriend and the baby inside her.”

Xavier looked to Rachel, who averted her eyes in shame. “I won’t stand down,” he said.

Chuck raised his gun. “Then I’ll put you down!”

Suddenly most of the camp was training their weapons on the two lonesome Boogie Boys.

“If you kill us, the Cons will kill you. It’ll be a massacre,” Chuck growled.

“He’s right,” Luco said, pushing Chuck’s gun down slowly. “But there’s been enough bloodshed and wasted lives. Let’s keep this between two men. If you have the heart, then draw on me, Xave. Survival of the fastest. Go on then.” His fingers tapped on the pistol in its holster.

“Don’t do it!” Jace shouted. Others joined in pleading. “Just let us shoot them!”

Xavier looked around the others sadly, and at Rachel’s teary eyes. He motioned for the others not to fire and put his hand over the revolver on his belt.

“If one life is all it takes...”

The others wanted to stop it, but there was a general paralysis that froze all but the two men who stood deadlocked, eyes blazing with determination.

“On three, then,” Xavier said, his voice quivering. “One...”

“Two...” Luco said, leering with his evil eyes.

A shot rang out and a cry went up. Xavier fell and smoke rose from Chuck’s gun, a satisfied grin on his face.

“No! No!” Rachel screamed to the sky, and suddenly Ozy, Jace, and Kimmy opened fire on the two Boogie Boys, who dove behind the large rock at the center of Camp. A gunfight broke out and the rest scattered or opened fire.

Grace fled for the sick tent, but found it empty, a huge gash slit in the back, drag marks leading away into the woods toward the dock. She ran farther, directionless, and slammed into Orwell’s arms, nearly toppling him over. “God, it’s horrible!” she cried.

“What, honey, what?” Orwell comforted her, holding her tight. Delton, Mike, and Kenny were just behind him. “What was that gunshot?”

“Luco and Chuck! They killed Xavier! They sold us out to the raiders who are almost here!”

It took just a second for what it all meant to flash past their eyes.

“I knew those bastards were plotting something! We gotta get the others and go!” Mike said.

“We can’t. We’re surrounded on all sides, and they killed Spencer and Tacitus, too. The kids are gone and Diana can’t find Gavin, and Pel’s gone with the others in the tent! It’s over! It’s over!” she sobbed. “I can’t believe it, not like this...”

More gunshots erupted, and far-off shouting from foreign voices.

“Hold yourself together, honey. We’re surrounded?” Orwell asked, calm as he could.

“A whole army!”

“Then we have to get out somehow. Live to fight another day.”

“There’s too many...!”

“Then we’ll hide,” Kenny suggested, and the others looked at him. “If we can get to one of our hunting blinds, no one will find us.”

“You’re right!” Mike’s eyes brightened a little. “There’s half a dozen of them just on this side of the pond. We can wait it out, hop between them and escape. And if they spot us, I’m not going down without a fight.”

“What about the others?” Orwell said, but they could already hear the invaders surrounding the rest of Camp, ordering them to lay down their weapons. The shots had all but ceased.

“We can’t help them if we’re captured too. Fight another day.”

Orwell swallowed his objections and turned to Delton, almost as if for approval. Delton’s usually-stone face was twisted with distress, the menthol cigarette shaking in his little hand, his eyes downturned. He nodded once silently and dropped his half-smoke cigarette, and the others took that as license to go.

“Wait! We can’t leave her!” Grace howled, grinding her heels into the ground as Mike and Orwell pulled and muffled her.

“You said she was gone from the tent?” Orwell said, taking his hands off her mouth. She nodded. “Then she’s probably away from here, safer than any of us.”

They tugged her again and she stayed dead still. Orwell grabbed her by the shoulders. “We’ll find her. I promise. But you know she’d want you to go! So go!”

When she stood there silent, watching the ground, his calm broke for a moment. “You know I love her too!”

That was enough to make her move, and they left there, by the dock, running into the woods, shooting at anything that moved.

...

Ozy saw a glimpse of them fleeing as he dutifully followed Rachel toward the dock.

“You shouldn’t follow me. Go, run after them,” she told Ozy sadly. Her voice was weak, her spirit broken.

There was an explosion of shots with all different sounds from the direction they had fled. Ozy shook his head. “I’m staying with you. I promised Xavier.”

She had to struggle to fight back tears. “It’s over with! Go! At least you can get out!”

“I promised!”

“So what?! He’s dead! You want to stay with me? I lied to him! I sold my body for dope while he tried to help me quit! I got knocked up and it probably isn’t even his and he never even knew...” She sobbed into her hands.

“He did know. He told me. And he still made me vow to watch over you.”

She looked up at him with wide, bloodshot eyes and bawled. He wanted to hug her but didn’t know how.

“So that’s it,” Beckett said, appearing in front of them suddenly. “What tangled webs we weave, huh?”

Ozy growled at him. Rachel wheeled around: “Why are you here? Just to rub it in?”

“Just wanted my back to something when I get gunned down in a minute, and the water’s the closest thing I got to a wall.” He pumped his shotgun. “Xavier had the right idea, going down fighting.”

“What about your friends, you idiot?”

Beckett’s lips pushed together tightly. “They just got 'em. At least they’ll live.”

“You really are a coward.”

“Right, *I’m* the coward.”

“You still have something to live for, but you’re standing here fantasizing about going out in a blaze of glory.”

Beckett stomped and growled. “It’s not my first choice, princess! What do you want me to do, turn in my guns? Bend over and take it like the rest of them? I won’t fucking do it!”

“Live on.”

“Right. Survive. That’s all anyone seems to think about anymore. Worked out great for you, for us. At least Xavier went out with dignity.”

“Dignity? He’s dead, you fuck! They’ll take the clothes off him and leave him for the rats and worms! That’s dignity?!”

“It’s better that way. There’s worse things than dying. Guess you already know that, though.”

“You libertarian bumpersticker closeted trash scum-sucking pussy! It’s never better dying!”

“What do you want me to do then?!”

They were silent, the sounds around them so close yet trapped away as if they were in a bubble of separate reality, and the bubble was ready to pop and rip all the air from their lungs in an instant and disintegrate the whole world around them.

Ozy looked out to the waters which stirred with the dark promise of a coming storm. “*Auf dem Lande, auf dem Mer...*” he muttered under his breath, and an idea flashed behind his eyes and came to his lips: “We can swim for it!”

“What?!”

“The water! They didn’t send any boats this time, see? It’s the last way out. If we swim fast and try to stay underwater most of the time, maybe they won’t see us.”

Beckett looked back toward Camp, where Rome was fast burning, and to Rachel. “He’s right.”

“Go, leave me here. I can’t raise a kid out there. And if there’s even a chance it’s his...” Her hand touched her tummy without her thinking.

Sad realization came over Ozy’s face, but just as quickly, he doubled down on his vow: “If you’re staying, I’m staying.” He meant it, but he looked to Beckett as if for one last hope in this man he barely knew and didn’t much like.

Beckett ran beside them, threw his arms around them both. “Xavier died because he refused to go in with these fucks. You think he’d want either of you staying if there were a chance to run away? You think he’d want *his* child raised in a place where Luco and Chuck are in charge?”

She bit her lips. Beckett stood, silhouetting the darkening sky and the shifting waters, his hand held out for her.

### 31 - Turnabout

The blindfold, gag, and earplugs came off Spencer and he found himself handcuffed to a tree, bleeding from the leg, in incredible, searing pain. He’d been dosed with some sort of narcotic that made the wound just bearable enough to not scream his lungs out in front of the three pint-sized kids.

Jack, Char, and Zane were shouting in sign language, grunting quietly like deaf people. He wondered at it all till he realized they weren’t hiding the conversation from him, but communicating so that Smoke could understand from wherever she was lurking.

“So, here we are,” Spencer said.

They looked over and Jack asked why Zane had taken the sock out of his mouth. Zane went over to put back in.

“No, no! Don’t do that! Whatever you want answered, I can tell you,” Spencer assured them. He’d have to play this carefully, with the drugs and pain dulling his wits.

Zane walked up to him, his head and eye cocked as if drilling into his captive’s core. “Who said we wanna ask you anything? I’m convincing them to just let me shoot you.”

“You already shot me.” Just talking about it made the pain flare up. “And the others won’t like you disappearing me.”

“Who said they have to know?” Zane grinned.

“Especially when they know what you did!” Char added. “We know you were trying to betray us to the raiders! You let them attack Camp and almost kill everyone!”

“I suppose Luco and Chuck told you that?” Spencer sighed.

“We heard you talking about it with them, about the Queen, about joining up with the Confederacy. I knew you were a bad guy!” Char shouted in his face and stomped back by her brother, huffing.

“Does that sound like the plan of someone who just wants safety and order for us? It’s true, I wanted to join our camp with the Confederates... but peacefully. They aren’t all raiders. There are no true villains in this world. Some of their generals are trying to whip the gangs into civilized camps under the guidance of the Queen, but it’s a process, and Xavier would never hear of it. He’s goodhearted, but misguided by flimsy ideals. And Luco and Chuck, too impatient and power-hungry. They orchestrated the attack, betrayed you and me, put us at each other's throats.”

The children looked at each other surprisedly, though Jack tried his best to hide it.

“You see it now? They played us. Only we can stop them.”

The kids started speaking in sign again. “This all wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t already talking to the raiders behind Xavier’s back,” Jack reminded him.

*Clever boy.* “I did it for everyone,” Spencer said. “As a leader, you sometimes have to do things you don’t like and work with people who aren’t your favorite— people you may have even shot at before.” He looked at each of them and stopped on Jack: “I imagine you would understand that. You were forced into Xavier’s camp, but tell me it wasn’t better for you and your friends to have allies, a little civilization, not having to sleep with one eye open. That’s all I was trying to do by joining our camp with the Confederates. There would be hurdles, the others would have protested, but eventually they would have understood it and been happy for it.”

“That’s a bunch of shit!” Zane exploded. “Let’s shoot this guy then go back and shoot the other two! The others will *understand* that!”

“Quiet! I’m thinking,” Jack hushed him, pacing in circles. He walked toward Spencer. “We liked being free, just the five of us. It was hard sometimes, we’d go hungry, wake up to looters. We’d have to fight. But we made our own decisions. We were in control.”

“Do you feel in control now?” Spencer asked him.

“Do you?”

Spencer was taken aback, then grinned. “It’s ironic. My group and yours, always outsiders. Damned with the others, damned without them.”

“We were fine without 'em,” Jack said coolly. “We thought you guys were tough, especially Tacitus, but Smoke was better. Seeing you scheming and screwing each other over, you’re not so tough. You don’t even have a group anymore.”

“My loyalty is to our friends at Camp. It always was. And Tacitus, is he safe? Did your friend hurt him?... Kill him?”

Jack looked back with a face that only said he wasn’t telling.

Then he stopped and listened as a Morse message came through the soundpiece in his ear. “Wait... something’s wrong... a hundred enemies at Camp... most captured... Xavier’s dead.”

“Is Smoke safe?! Is she safe?!” Char blurted.

“Chill out! I’m listening to her message...” He stood with his hand pressed to his ears while they waited impatiently. “Ok, we gotta get out of here. Now. Smoke said she’ll be safe where she is. We’ll meet back at the old car in case others go there.”

They readied up as if they had instantly forgotten about Spencer altogether. He spoke up: “Wait! Cut me loose before you go!”

“Why should we?” Jack glared.

“Yeah, if we leave him the Confederates will just find him and untie him, and then he’ll wanna come after us too! I say we kill him,” Zane suggested.

“If it were that simple, I’d want you to just leave me, but I’m afraid the first thing Luco and Chuck will do is come back here and kill me first. And if they don’t find me before the Confederates, they’ll at least have poisoned them against me. If you leave me here, I’m a dead man. You might as well put a bullet in my head.” *A risky move, phrasing it so sharply, but the only one who really wants to kill me is the mouthy one. Chartreuse will want mercy, and Jack will want to keep me alive for some use.*

As if he was psychic, Char confirmed Spencer’s inner calculations: “We can’t just kill him or leave him to die,” she whispered, nudging Jack.

“Damn right we can!” Zane exploded.

Jack reluctantly drew a Buck knife and approached Spencer.

Maybe his calculations weren’t spot on. Maybe these kids really were going to cut him like a pig. What a way to go.

“Come on, that isn’t you!” Spencer wriggled. “Bleeding a man without even a trial!”

“Like you killed those 2 prisoners back at Camp?” Jack pondered.

“Enemy combatants! Some of them *are* raiders, through and through! You don’t understand their politics. I do.”

“I think you didn’t want them to talk. They might have exposed you.”

“Maybe I was a bit hasty, but half of the Firestarters are good people, and half just want our heads on sticks-”

“And you wanted to force us to join them!”

“I believed in my plan! It was for us and our friends! And-and-and killing me? It’s pointless. Think what else I know! I’ve seen the camp the Confederates will take them to! I know the layout! I know how their people fight! If there’s any chance of helping them, of saving little Ozy, you’ll need my knowledge!”

Jack held the blade in front of Spencer’s guts, took a deep breath, and began to cut into the fibers of the rope that kept his legs tied together, then freed him from the tree and re-cuffed him.

“You’re our prisoner now,” Jack told Spencer. “You don’t touch any weapons and you do exactly what we say or else I let Zane put a bullet between your eyes. Understand?”

“Right,” Spencer said. When he tried to step, he fell to his knees and felt his wounded leg. The pain was dizzying. He could imagine the hole in the flesh, a pouring fount of pain and weakness. “I won’t be at my usual fast pace until I’ve dug this slug out.”

“Then you’ll dig it out. Later.” Jack looked to the others. “Let’s move.”

Char followed and Zane pushed Spencer ahead and followed behind. “If you don’t keep up, I’ll shoot you. I won’t leave you behind, I’ll shoot you.”

Spencer looked back with a grimace, then ahead with a smirk. “Duly noted.”

### 32 - The remnants

*Some days later.*

Scattered landmarks flashed in front of Lyle’s eyes, leading him toward Camp. A terrible smell of burnt flesh and clothes greeted him, and he soon wandered past a pile of half a dozen burnt bodies, all ash and blackened skeletons. Were these the bodies of his friends, all slaughtered by some unknown catastrophe? His heart sunk into the acid bile at the bottom of his gut and bathed and burnt there.

He had to convince himself it was all still a dream. But the illusion was harder to keep as he came to the ruins of Camp. Half the tents were melted into mounds of blackened plastic. Delton’s tent had been torn to shreds, holes dug all about it, and tracks and dragmarks showed that Delton’s priceless locked chests of goods had been pulled away by ATVs. A few bloated bodies lay scattered about, but none were his friends, thankfully.

Then he found a shallow grave fringed with upturned leaves and rocky dirt. He knew this was one of his before he even saw the crude cross of rotted 2x4’s above it that read: “Xavier Dougan — 2001-2022.”

He fell to his knees at the base of the cross and bitterly wept.

A metal clicking sound broke his vigil.

“Lyle?” A girl’s voice.

It was Penelope, the gay communist, pointing the slanted brake of her AK-47 his way. Or an apparition just as likely. He couldn’t even speak to her. The dead were real. The living couldn’t be.

“Is that really you? What are you doing here? Where the hell did you go?”

“I don’t know,” Lyle said, barely audible. “I’ve been walking or running for so long. It brought me back here.” *Whatever ‘it’ is...*

She lowered her weapon and knelt next to him, her hand on his back. “They all went away. The Confederates took most of them. The rest ran or... I don’t know.”

“The Confederates... came here?...”

“Yeah, after the first attack. Turns out Luco and Chuck had a whole plan cooked up to get us to merge with them. I think the attack wasn’t supposed to be an attack, just ensuring we didn’t have a choice except to pack up and go with 'em. But somehow, it turned into a fight, and somehow we won. I think it had something to do with the weird silent ones, Tac and Smoke.”

“I don’t get it. Why would they work with the Confederates on one hand, and shoot them on the next?”

“Don’t think they had a choice once people started shooting. But the next day the Confederates came back with more people than we could ever handle, so Camp was going down one way or another. Luco and Chuck killed Xavier and somehow got rid of Spencer, Tac, and the kids, so when the ‘Cons got here again, there was nothing to do for most of us but throw down our weapons.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, worse. I hid, to stay and save Cook. They left him here to die with his wounds and the infection... But I couldn’t save him.”

“That’s not your fault...”

“Save it. I’ve heard it all before.” She looked away, her eyes full of sadness and anger. “When the shooting started, you woke up and cut through the tent like a madman and ran. I almost ran after you, but I remembered Cook and dragged him under the dock where no one could find us. I had to watch as the rest of them got captured or scattered. I had to watch Grace and Orwell go... She didn’t know where I was, that I was safe here... Must be eating her up... God damn it.”

“Who else got away?”

“Don’t you get it?! It doesn’t matter anymore! They’re gone and Cook and Xavier are dead! So much for fucking civilization.” She ran into the tent cursing. Lyle blinked, trying to make sense of it all, and followed her.

There she was beside Cook’s white, still body. Reality flooded in on him. He fell beside her and they cried together.

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They tossed the half-broken shovel away and stood silently, looking at the second grave, now filled. The silence drove Penelope mad and made her say the first words that came to mind: “He was a good man. Kind, generous... Made the best damn food. What else can you ask for from a comrade?”

Lyle was quiet for a while. “He was a good man,” he agreed.

Penelope sighed and slapped his back too hard.

A noise in the distance interrupted their vigil, and they ran into the sick tent. They held their guns tightly, peering out the screen. A man in beat up gear stood over the fresh graves, whispering to himself.

“Scout,” Penelope said. “They keep sending them back to make sure none of ours came back here. We should shoot him while we have a chance.”

“Wait,” Lyle answered.

The man said a few more things and started walking toward them. Lyle and Penelope fell back on their hands and feet and aimed at the front flap, ready to fire. It unzipped a little. Their breaths stopped.

“Freeze, motherfucker!” Pel shouted, and the man fell backwards and away. All of them were ready to start blasting.

“Who’s that?” a familiar voice called out.

“Wait!” Lyle pointed the muzzle of her rifle down. “Beckett?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Lyle. Fuck.”

There was a terrible, long pause before Beckett said: “What the fuck are you doing in there?” Lyle and Penelope scoured their brains for an answer till Beckett said, “Alright, I’m coming in.”

They were all silent.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he said.

“Beckett. Saw you swim out of here with Ozy and that whore,” Penelope finally said.

“Yeah. They’re not far from here, hiding somewhere semi-safe.”

She scowled at the thought of Rachel. “Good. For the kid at least. How’d you survive these past couple days?”

“Same way we did before. Stay out of sight and out of trouble.” He suddenly looked despondent. “I shouldn’t have run. I shouldn’t have gotten away when the others didn’t.”

Penelope reached out and patted him. “Don’t sweat it. You made the right call as far as I’m concerned.”

“But I abandoned them. I left Kimmy, Jace, Jerry, the twins!... They’re out there all alone with those bastards and it’s my fault.” He rubbed the grit off his shotgun and his face turned from sadness to revenge. “But we’ll get them back. And get our pound of flesh too.”

“Oh? How the hell do you expect to do that? Wishful thinking?” Penelope asked.

“We break in there, get our people and get out of there.”

“Sounds like a solid plan. Anyone sane have any input?”

Lyle was staring straight ahead. She smacked his thigh and he barely moved.

“What’s up with him?” Beckett asked.

“I can’t...” Lyle said to no one.

“Can’t what?”

“Can’t do it. Can’t go out. Can’t help. If I do anything, I’ll die.”

Everyone looked around unsurely, till Penelope sighed and said: “Yeah, that’s sort of the central issue, bucko. Whatever we do is gonna be dangerous as shit, but we still gotta do something.”

“Not me. Not anymore. I can’t touch anything anymore or more people will die.”

Beckett straightened his back. “You didn’t cause this, those shitters Luco and Chuck did. The ‘Cons did. You got knocked out from a grenade in the fight. We both did. I woke up. We didn’t know if you would.”

The image only reminded Lyle more of graves and their dead. He didn’t want to sleep in the earth like his parents, like Cook and Xavier.

“I’m cursed,” Lyle simply said. “Death follows me everywhere. I’m scared. I’m afraid to die.”

Penelope’s eye twitched and she suddenly jerked him up by his arm and dragged him out of the tent as the other two watched.

“Look at them!” she shouted, pushing him in front of the two fresh graves.

“I already-”

“Shut up! Look at them! You think they wanted to die? You don’t think they were just as scared as you are? When Xavier looked at Luco, knowing he was going to get gunned down for standing up to him? When Cook died from internal bleeding and infection from an explosion that blew his ankle to pieces and sunk shrapnel into his stomach? You don’t think they were scared too?”

His fingers clenched the freshly upturned dirt.

“You think you’re unique? The only one who lost someone? Only one that blames yourself? The only one that’s afraid to lose more?”

Lyle stared into the ground and thought he could see his friends there, smiling in restful sleep. Something profound was happening in his heart, like the rising tides that beat against the inside of his chest finally spilled over and began to subside and let him breathe freely a little again.

“...None of us expected to be here, in this bullshit situation in this bullshit clown world. No one could be ready for half the world to die and the other half to go insane, trying to kill each other. But we’ve got friends, a few people that are almost sane enough to tolerate...”

Lyle looked up at her, almost blinded by the tears in his eyes.

“...and they’re prisoners to a bunch of wannabe fascist psychos right now, and we’re the only chance they have to get out. So we’re not gonna sit here crying while they rot. We’re gonna do something. Or at least I am. Someone’s gotta have some fuckin’ balls.”

“I’m gonna do something too,” Beckett said.

Beckett walked over with Lyle’s father’s 1911 he’d left in the tent, stood behind Lyle, hand on his back and handed it to him. “You dropped this.”

Lyle took the gun, looked at it. *I could eat a bullet right now. Put an end to all of this.*

He put it in the holster on his belt and rose up unsteadily, standing on two feet.

“That’s the spirit.” Penelope slapped his back. “Now we’ve got work to do.”

### 33 - A girl and her dog, part 2

Darkness and cold fell as Cat lay down against a stone wall, squeezing Cudo tightly against her chest. They were on a woodline beside a forested road. It was the last place she wanted to be now.

In the past thirty-six hours, her world had turned to sporadic gunfire and distant shouting in every direction. It made the ‘cold war’ and grim survival of the days and months before seem tame in comparison.

Wherever she turned, armed forces were stirring. Ragtag gangs and small armies hoisted shotguns and rifles toward the sky. Others dug into defensive positions, meanfaced and hard, waiting to kill or be killed. Young looters were more desperate and aggressive than ever, while defenders were alert and merciless. Warning shots were a thing of the past. If you were seen, the world whizzed and popped as bullets outlined you.

She could feel their fear, their anger in the air, if not from the very sounds of their voices.

Gunshots, shouting, screams, wherever she turned.

The crack of gunfire had threatened Cat more times than she could count. The dead were numerous, and worse, fresh.

The world was in chaos, and any civility or peace that man had known had been tossed to the torrential winds of violence and upheaval. Her mind could not think why, but she knew it must have something to do with the platoon-sized force of men marching down the road ten feet from her.

She ran from danger and disaster all day. The forest bore no safety anymore. Now she had ended up here, beside some sixty strange warriors who would likely kill her on sight, if not worse.

They were young men nearly all, rough and mean, but exuberant. Something about this day of butchery had them in high spirits, and though she tried to stay invisible, to disappear entirely while they passed, she couldn’t help but listen as they marched by in a seemingly endless line.

“Went better than yesterday!” a voice said.

“Easy mop-up,” another agreed. “Didn’t have to kill no one this time.”

“Plenty of girls in this group too.”

“Yeah buddy. They’re hot, but lookin’ pretty mopey.”

“They’ll learn. Just like when I was in the Army. There’s a period of adjustment for everyone in Boot. Same in the Con Camp. ‘Cept it ain’t half as bad. Buckets of booze, girls, takin’ whatcha want, livin’ the dream.”

“Yeah, yeah, guy, you never mentioned you were in the Army before,” the other quipped. A bunch of them started laughing.

There was a venom in their voices that made Cat shiver from head to toe. Cudo started struggling and rumbling again, and she squeezed him harder, praying he wouldn’t reveal them.

“That tall chick’s a real maniac though. Took five guys to take her down, and she punched a few of them and even broke one of the Fire boys’ fingers I heard.”

“Eh, they’re all a bunch of wusses anyways. Skulls all the way!”

“SKULL MAFIA, KILL OR DIE! SKULLS! SKULLS! URAH!” a chorus of twenty of them sang, shaking the world. Their banter faded off to an indistinguishable murmur of jeering and laughter. Cat heard only the jingle of gear and footsteps, weeping.

That sad sound made her curiosity become unbearable. She slowly rose up, still holding tight to Cudo, and peered between two rocks in the stonewall.

A small army was indeed marching past, as far as she could see from around the bends in either direction. Prisoners followed in tow. Most held their heads low, watching the ground.

Cat didn’t recognize any of them, though she searched their defeated faces. Who would she know anyway? Everyone she loved was gone, and this was simply further evidence of the fact. Everyone except Cudo, who rumbled and sighed at the multitude of strangers he could smell and hear but could not see.

A tall beautiful woman was behind them, gagged and blindfolded. Her hands were bound to a thin metal pole from which she dangled as two giants of men carried her along, staring straight ahead with dead eyes. Her feet kicked and flailed in the air as she screamed muffledly behind the two strips of tattered duct tape wrapped around her face. Her hair was a mess, her garments torn and stained in places with blood. Even from here, Cat could see that she was covered in scratches and bruises. She gasped at the sight, but couldn’t remove her eyes even as the bound woman and her captors disappeared around the corner.

Cat’s eye caught onto someone in the line. It couldn’t be...

That odd boy from the woods weeks ago!... What was his name? Jerry!

His hands were zip-tied, where most of the other prisoners’ were cuffed or double or even triple zip-tied. He looked around casually, like he didn’t have a care in the world, but somehow she knew that wasn’t true. Just as before, there was something mesmerizing about him, something otherworldly about his calm as he was surrounded by such inhuman chaos.

Just as she thought it, his head snapped toward her and their eyes locked for just two seconds. The longest two seconds she ever felt. In it, an indescribable communication of such sheer power and magnitude took place that her human brain couldn’t process it, yet immediately responded to it. She dropped down, afraid.

When she slowly peeked up again, he was farther down the line, his head pointed to the right where he just might... no, couldn’t possibly see him. But he was nodding... no, pointing. Pointing toward the woods from where she had come, back away from them.

He disappeared around the bend and soon the marching line did too, leaving dust and terror in its wake. Suddenly she ran away from the wall and the road, running into the woods for dear life, with Cudo heavy in her arms. She came to the base of a steep hill and climbed it one-handed, never letting go. Maybe she could be safe up here, away from everything down there.

There were few hills in the area. It must be a sign. Jerry must want her to go up here.

It took ten long minutes. She at last pulled herself onto a massive stone at the peak, surrounded by brush. She let Cudo down and collapsed, hot and sweating.

He rumbled and snorted. She wanted to grab his mouth and close it like she often had to do, but she couldn’t reach. Oh well, they must be far away from it all up here.

She turned her head. Rolling forests and hills surrounded a flat valley of concrete littered with tall and stout grey structures, a great red brick building, and two or three hundred ant-sized humans coming and going from scattered tents. Bright white lights and dozens of campfires from which plumes of smoke rose illuminated it in spots. Gunshots could be heard, and the far-off shouting of men.

The fire training grounds. She had seen it once, as a little girl, when her parents took her to the Dogs and Cats Rescue Society building right across from it. Her whole life, she had always wanted a dog.

The marching line slowly entered a half-mile below her and others in the camp came to greet them. The warriors dispersed among their comrades. The prisoners were placed in the dog kennels beside the animal shelter as crowds gathered and shouted evil cheers.

It was a battle camp. The conflict was just beginning.