

**Laniakea**

By

Veronica Este

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Department of English and Film Studies  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis employs the tool of story to question cultural ignorance towards religious differences, by focusing on various religious depictions of the Apocalypse and the Afterlife. It contains a novella-length work of fiction set in a dystopian Canadian landscape during the unfolding of pre-determined apocalyptic events, built off of the ideologies of death and the afterlife in world belief systems. The existence of this prophesized end is the common ground for the story to bring the chosen worships together in a singular space and give opportunity for the similarities to play out. The formed methodology is broken down into two main components: Research, to ensure authenticity of topic, and Creative, the fictional story. There was never an intention to find a solution to my question about why there is such tension between the belief systems, instead the goal of the project was to successfully imbed the collected research within a new narrative that presented the research in a new perspective.

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## Critical Introduction

### "Comparative Visions of Death and Apocalypse: A Research Creation in Fiction"

When I was growing up, religion was mainly important to my grandparents, at least in the sense of being committed church-goers: every Sunday, holidays, that sort of thing. As far as I understand, the only reason I was ever involved in the Catholic Church at all was because of promises my parents made to theirs; the promise to uphold the rites that they both also went through, along with their siblings. It was not until I got older that I began to question this commitment to a set of faith-based practices, as I became more aware and knowledgeable about the existence of other religions. My parents were open to talking about the values and practices of other religions, and while they were not extremely knowledgeable, they did their best to answer what they could. A few years into my teens I began to learn about world religions as I attended a public high school. The foundation I gained through life experiences during this time got me interested in learning how religions all appeared to differ from the other, what similarities could be living within them. With that curiosity, questions began to form.

I find that the best way to process questions about the world is through story, mostly fiction, as anything else seems to have a hard time holding my attention. I didn't want to read nonfiction about someone reliving problems I had already faced; I wanted a new world that challenged the one I was living in. When I wrote, I would write abstract poems and stories riddled with symbolism and alternate perspectives that voiced the questions I wouldn't have answers to, or at least simple ones. My generation is widely referred to as millennials, but we are also Gen Y, and that is exactly what it has always been for me, wanting to know *why*.

The questions spiraled out of control from there, like a thread unravelling, and the curiosity motivated me to want to find answers. The answers were something I could find out

through reading the stories and myths within the various religions in question.

## 1. Story as a Tool

This project began with a question about similarities and differences in depictions of apocalypse and the afterlife and the corresponding research is about taking things stated within religious scriptures, and reworking that information to bring a creative angle to the conversation. The approach is often classified as Research Creation, a term that many associate with art forms: sculptures, paintings, something that resulted in a physical creation. However, while it is not often thought of as having the same tangibility of sculptures or paintings, story is the same way. Story, specifically fictional narratives, present reality in alternate ways, working like endless what if's: what if this happened? What if the problem was exaggerated to the point that people cannot ignore it? What if I put the things people cannot say into the mouths of characters that live in a world where those words can make a difference? To view fiction stories as a format for research creation actively transforms the process of writing and reading into a tool that can be molded as needed; a tool that can access many different audiences in a way that academic research cannot. Story is often viewed as a form of escapism, and a way to remove oneself from reality, but it can also be used to immerse yourself further within the world around you, only this time, in a metaphorical way. Fiction reflects the world by creating a platform for reality to be exaggerated in a way that allows for a new framework of analysis.

Patricia Leavy states in *Fiction as Research Practice* that fiction "allows access to imaginary worlds, to re-examine the world we live in," in order to "enter into the psychological processes in a way that can motivate people" (20). She argues that using fictional story can "challenge the fact/fiction dichotomy and force a renegotiating of boundaries between the two" (21). Viewing story as something that can motivate and renegotiate ideals through a fact and

fiction dichotomy begins to shape story in a format that can be used as a medium, turning text into a tool. Hoi Cheu's *Stories as a Scientific Method in Arts-Based Research* argues that stories are important when it comes to relaying research to multiple audiences, because "storytelling is a more efficient way to communicate the nonlinearity and interconnectedness that researchers identify as the complexity of data" (212). Fiction is written in a way that allows for a variety of audiences to be able to understand the collected data or theory easier than they would reading a more advanced academic paper on the same topic.

When a story is fictionalized into an artistic medium, authors need to present information in a new way through the usage of symbolic language. As Rachele Viader Knowles discusses in *Collaboration, Dialogues, and Wild Knowledge*, the "role of artistic research is to articulate a way of knowing, which cannot be articulated within the respected fields of knowledge" (203). Research creation does not aim to "answer any question, but marks out a series of vantage points to open onto a plane of discussion" (203), in a way that forms the ability to re-evaluate the knowledge in a creative format.

## **2. Interpretations of Death and the Afterlife**

"Primus in orbe deos fecit timor."

Paraphrasing theorist Ernest Becker, Jonathon Jong claims that "the knowledge of fear and death is humanity's central driving force, underlying civilization and all human achievement" (86). There is a natural discomfort that comes when speaking about the idea of death and the ending of one's existence, and "studies show that thinking about death can affect religious and non-religious people differently" (Jong 90). When creating my story, I had to take into consideration the existence of this discomfort with speaking about death and the end of one's existence. This shaped the way I approached the formation of the fictional world and the plotline

within it. I knew that when writing my story, I had to find an abstract way to work around the anxiety of death. My intention was for the story to become a type of linear space, a world of neutrality that gives the ability for multiple narratives to play out in the same landscape.

### **3. Creative Format: Story Structure**

Choosing the creative format for my project was easy, in the sense that I knew it was going to be in a fiction story format; but it was also difficult, because I knew that I would have a lot to say within only a few pages. The format of a novella was the best option for my timeframe and project structure, and it was also the best option for overcoming two key issues when it comes to choosing a structure: content and audience. Storyline and plotline are two different aspects according to Leavy's approach, which are combined to form the fictional novella structure. The plot "refers to the overall structure of the narrative" (59), and I built it around various religious end of the world narratives. The storyline "refers to the progression, or sequence of events within the plot" (59), and in this case, I focused on the creation of the characters and the interaction of moral beliefs and their understandings of their afterlives.

#### **3.1. World Building**

I had to make some tough decisions early on in the writing process, and choose to represent only some of the world's religions in my story. When choosing these, I took inspiration from a course I completed during my undergraduate degree: Interpretations of Death and the Afterlife in Westernized Religions. It focussed on six specific religious traditions commonly found within North American culture: the three main Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), Greek mythology, Norse mythology and Buddhism.

#### **3.2 Character Development**

Even authors with the best intentions can mess up when touching on delicate themes, and

I knew that could be an issue when it came to my own story, such as the depiction of characters who represent certain religions. I found Patricia Leavy's work helpful in my effort to avoid stereotypes and portray "people and setting realistically, truthfully, and authentically" (38). When working with art-based research, Leavy claims that "combining research with fiction uniquely allows us to create alternate worlds to insert theoretical, social, and philosophical minded substructures" (38). The way I used research with fiction was to create a fictional landscape from apocalyptic descriptions from various religious traditions, but it was the formation of religions within the characters themselves that I had to analyze, and choose the right effective framework for them. An example of this character formation is seen in Pandora. I developed her character based on beliefs found in Greek Mythology, forming her character to someone not bound by the same moral systems taught within the Abrahamic faiths. She is focused on doing what she has to to survive, as well as playing the role of her mythological creation: a woman who was created with the intention of being the ultimate woman, gifted with beauty and smarts, formed with the intention of being irresistible.

When approaching this project, I knew I would need to negotiate a careful line in the depiction of characters who are meant to represent specific religions. J. Jong discusses the difference between a religious belief and a religious experience when discussing the idea of faith as a fear of death. He says that an individual's belief is "much more responsive to research than" an individual's experience in society through the framework of that belief (90). I could not write about experience, because everyone is different, but I could write about religious writings. Using the approach of focusing on the structures laid out within certain scriptures, I created characters that followed the most basic outline of the religions they represented.



#### **4. Who's Missing and Why: Indigenous Belief System**

To write a story about religions in Canada and not include anything about the Indigenous people that live here would have been wrong; however, attempting to put all the various teachings down on paper, with the voice that I have, would have been worse. The reason that I was able to include the research aspect of this project, is because I had ready access to written accounts of religious apocalypses. I was able to order many of the needed texts off-line, or look up whatever else I couldn't easily grab at my local bookstore. I could find scholarly commentaries on various aspects of the world religions of interest to me; however, it was not the same when it came to looking into Indigenous way of life. Stories that detailed the creation, expectations of relationship with the world and those in it, the prophesized end, are all narratives that the Indigenous do not widely share. They are not for sale, at least in the sense that the other religions have made themselves marketable. I cannot attend a weekly Sunday service for an Indigenous religion. I knew that to push forward with seeking these narratives out I would be opening a whole new door that would take me far beyond the scope of this project as I conceived it.

While I had to make sure I didn't cross a boundary in my story with Indigenous religion, to ignore the existence of Indigenous people completely would not have been possible. To make sure I didn't, I wrote the boundary into the story. The characters mention times they have come across individuals from First Nation reservations, but in the sense that they do not know what has happened to the Indigenous peoples, and that they are on a journey that the other religions do not have access to. There are moments when the characters come upon the entrance to a reserve, and wonder if their friends have been able to fight back and survive everything that has been happening; however, they actively do not cross the boundary onto the reserve's land to

investigate, because that is not a part of the story they are to tell.

## **5. Was the Point Made?**

It is difficult to say if a point was made or not, considering I am still not sure I ever intended one, but to assess what I accomplished I found it useful to consider Leavy's criteria for evaluating fiction-based research (79). Among these criteria are several that felt applicable to what I attempted to achieve with my novella:

### **1. Creation of a Virtual Reality**

There must be a "mood of reality," with "rich descriptions" that are contained within a speculative world (Leavy 80). The creation of the apocalyptic landscape that the characters live in, during an unknown time in the future, is full of details that form the creation of a speculative fictional world over the familiar contemporary Canadian landscape. The events of the apocalyptic literature help to form the virtual reality and set the scene.

### **2. The Presence of Ambiguity**

There needed to be flexibility in the project to "allow for a multiplicity of meanings," so that it can be "interpreted in many different ways" (Leavy 84). The sense of ambiguity is strong in the novel because there is never one direct answer given to questions about death or the afterlife. All the characters have their own roles to play and have their own interpretations of what will happen when they all die.

### **3. Substantive Contribution**

Art-based research should "always be about something," and it should not only "share knowledge" but also be "useful and increase awareness" (Leavy 85). The basis of my project began with a question that encouraged my research and gave me inspiration for a chosen fictional format. The goal of the research was to raise awareness about the similarities of some

religions.

#### 4. Aesthetics

The writing must be engaging, and filled with things such as "metaphors, similes, etc." (Leavy 86). The characters themselves are built around such structures, being reincarnations and walking metaphors for religions.

#### 5. Personal Signature

Art-based research must have the artist's own signature on it (Leavy 87). The form that I use begins with a thesis question, and builds into research that works to structure plot and storyline. My fictional writing style is something that I use in all of my writing, and combining it with the rubric of Leavy's art-based research is something that I have been working on shaping over the course of my undergrad degree and my Master's degree program.

#### 6. Audience

The last criteria that Leavy defines is audience, and she gives it three primary considerations: fit between design choice and audience, how text is presented, audiences response (88-9). I chose a fictional narrative written at a YA reading level because my project is not meant to reach only an academic audience, and is intended for a variety of reading levels as well as backgrounds.

### **6. Conclusion:**

I know that I never intended to find a solution to my questions about religion, and if anything, I have ended this project with more curiosity than I began with. I do believe that in a sense, there was a message successfully imbedded within the narrative I created. It was never about finding a solution to make everyone get along; this project was created to form an alternate world where a reader may experience different belief systems, and realize that their ways of life are not as different as they first thought. The characters do not survive in the end, the earth does

not get better, and society does not rebuild. They are victims of the prophecies that they are all a part of, but it is the coming together, despite all their differences, that cements the idea that we are all just scared humans, living in a universe we have no control over, and combatting that fear by choosing to believe in something more. Whether those beliefs are the same doesn't matter; what matters is that everyone believed in something enough to bring them peace at the end.

## Laniakea

I: Pan.

Location: Stoney Mountain, Manitoba, Canada.

The only time I can still see the stars is during the deepest part of the night, when the burning sun has yet to breach the horizon and turn the sky a hazy blood red. Nighttime has been shortened to only a few hours now, and it has made for many sleepless nights spent staying up to chart what little can still be seen of the constellations.

Last night was no different. I had stayed up to hastily sketch out a map of the overhead stars, working fast to copy everything down just as I was taught. My father's voice, my *Babá* as he always had me call him, whispered in my ears as I studied the map. His words explaining each figure in the sky.

*"...And just off the end of the Queen Cassiopeia, you will always find her husband, King Cepheus. You can tell because his constellation resembles somewhat of a house..."*

Fingers tracing the dots on the chart, I glance quickly into his telescope. Maybe I was wrong? Did I move the tube by accident, altering the tracked coordinates? My eyes search the sky for any traces of constellations left, but the rays of red light coming off the horizon have already wiped the stars. The sun's haze obscures the constellations again, but I had seen enough last night to know that the stars have changed. If all the long hours of my father drilling me on the different ways the night sky moved paid off, then I wasn't wrong. In fact, he made sure I never was, forcing endless re-dos of my constellation maps that were torn in his pursuit of perfection.

*"There is a right way and a wrong way to the sky my little gift, and you must always know which it is. To never lose your way."*

But what happens if the sky changes? And the lights of the constellations disappear? There has to be some notice of an explanation to the difference showing in the sky. The constellations are missing stars now, as if someone came and licked their fingers before extinguishing the flames of the far-away suns.

The knock at the door interrupts the riffling-through of the old maps I had from the last several months.

"Pan? Are you awake? It's time to get up." The closed door muffles my mother's voice as she calls out.

The pages crinkle loudly as I stuff them back into the box, voicing their complaints at not having been folded and properly tucked away. I cringe at hearing several tearing sounds as I smash the shoebox lid back on top. Shoving the evidence into the closet, I kick the box towards the back wall, dragging the container of winter clothes in front of it. The hoarding Mom had taken on over the past few years worked to help hide memories I know will only upset her. It has been years since we saw him, but Mom still misses him as if it was yesterday. The pain evident behind her "everything-is-fine-and-normal" façade that she continues to put on.

She looks so different to who she once was. The person who would leave the house for the bank early in the morning, her and dad sharing a kiss on her way out. Always dressed in one of her pressed pantsuits, and loud high-heels that I could hear clicking around the kitchen every morning making coffee. Now she spends most days standing at the front window, hair laced with grey, and dad's old diary clasped in her hands.

"Morning," I say, planting a happy look on my face, and lightly kicking shut the closet door behind me. "I was just about to come down, I need to leave early today."

My lips kiss her cheek quickly as I slip passed her into our narrow upstairs hall. It's Ration Day, and the most nutritious stuff is always swiped early.

"We could wait another week. I still have a few cans stored in the basement." The worry is clear in her voice. "The first of the month always draws the biggest crowds, just go next time," Mom says. Her fingers twisting the sleeves of her worn-in housecoat.

I know it's only because she hates it when I go down to the Ration Center, and not because she believes we can last any longer without more supplies. We both know she won't go herself.

"Exactly," I smile in reassurance. "We need to stock up on some actual produce that we can freeze for a few weeks. Fresh product deliveries are getting rare, and we don't need to risk getting scurvy. Even if pirates make it seem cool."

To her credit, her face did loosen up for a split second from my rough attempt to lighten the mood, but it soon falls again. Her hand squeezing my arm as her eyes fill with tears, giving it a light pat before entering her darkened bedroom.

The "I'll be back by noon" I give in reply being spoken to her closed door. Silence the only response.

Putting the corner of a recently buttered piece of toast in between my teeth, I quickly strap the homemade protective gear across my chest and tuck my inherited swiss-army knife into the deep pocket on the side of my pants. The gear wasn't heavy, made light to not hinder any

movement and be as silent as possible when moving. It is layers and layers of duct-tape and pieces of tough fabric, only meant to stop potential stabbings or slowdown bullets. Sliding it overtop of my long-sleeved turtleneck, I pull it down so that the bottom of the make- shift vest rests just below the top of my black jeans.

The only skin visible being from my chin up, which I lather in sunscreen from the bottle next to the back door. UV radiation has tripled over the last few years, no wind – no clouds – plant life dying; the scarce landscape left little protection for the human body to tolerate the unrelenting blaze of the sun. Those who are still left here learned quick that it is better to sweat under layers than to burn. And it is also better to be weighed down by gear, than stabbed on the streets for what little you have in your pockets.

Checking the clock, I realize I have a little under an hour until the Ration Center opens, and could still take the long way around if I left now. Grabbing the house keys off the counter, I leave through the back door while quickly locking it behind me, following the worn path in our yellowed grass past the property line. Silence greets me as I step onto the two-lane highway, crossing briskly to avoid being seen out in the open. Big roads are dangerous, those with ill-intent often camp out on corners, throwing those seen walking along the roadside into unmarked vehicles. The underground sex slave trade had stepped into the open when society fell, and is currently worse than ever. Or thriving, depending on who you ask.

It wasn't long before I reached the clearing. Joh says that it is a form of my own self-torture by choosing to return to this spot so often. He doesn't understand how it can still hold anything good for me. It doesn't, but it does hold the last real memory that matters to me, the one that I need answers for.



The grass in the field is no longer manicured by the city every week; the greenspace now full of yellowed grass shriveled up after giving up on its last attempts at life. Relentless scorching dry heat, with air abandoned by any kind of breeze, had decimated the nature that once existed. The sand surrounding the play-structure dirty and filled with debris from the looting that the city has fallen victim too; the colors of the plastic slides on the play structure are now worn out and faded, only a background to the many spray-painted tags left by those who attempted to claim city space as their own. The swing set has only one leather seat attached now, half torn off, with the seat dragging by its left chain. The absence of the other swings is understandable though, leather is tough, thick enough to be used as shields against attacks. No longer the symbol of my innocent childhood, with nice days spent pumping my legs to swing higher each time; the set is now a sign of scavenging, a sign of someone else's act of survival.

My hands grasp the remaining chain, swinging it lightly as the broken clasp of the seat drags in the piles of sand surrounding the structure. For me, this was *his* monument, *his* tombstone, *his* marker of existence. There was no funeral. No setting to rest of someone who was so deserving of it. There was just him, and his hands pushing me on the swing, and then there wasn't. No gasp of breath, no sign or sound. Just absence. Gone.

But he wasn't the only one.

Everyone who is still here lost someone that day, and none of us were given the chance to say goodbye. From where I stand in the park, I can just make out where Mom found me. The wooden bench I had waited for her in utter confusion, with the tips of my shoes barely scraping the top of the ground. The voice of the stranger speaking on the phone to my mother filters up through my memories, using the contact number I must have given them— although I

don't remember ever speaking—then there was the voice of my mother echoing down the line, not understanding why someone she had never met was saying that she had to come get me. The bench had been chopped up a long time ago. The only remnants of the spot I waited being the metal clasps that were once attached to the park bench legs, still cemented into place along the broken and weeded pathway.

Mom was home alone when it happened. She didn't notice the absence of so many souls. Her confusion apparent on her face as she pulled up in the family car, the sound of the rusted-out muffler announcing her arrival. He was meant to fix it, he had promised her again that morning.

*"Right after the park with Pan, I'll swing by Roy's and check on that part. I swear!"*

She had smiled and shook her head, shooing us out the door so she could get ready for their weekly night out. I remember that the first thing I noticed about her was that she still had on her house slippers – something I had never at the time seen her do – something I know would have mortified her in any other circumstance. Nothing in that moment made sense to her; nothing made sense to anyone. People everywhere were just gone, including my dad. Those who were always meant to have answers had none. Endless phone calls to the police station went unanswered, yet Mom never stopped trying. She slept by the phone, hoping for it to ring with any kind of answer to something the entire world was struggling to comprehend. The attempts at funeral planning were never completed over those next few weeks. The entire world was mourning. Everyone had someone to memorialize. Many were forced to mourn over the disappearance of a loved one in the privacy of their own homes, with the curtains drawn and doors locked.

It was then that the world really turned against us. The solar waves began, and the population crumbled. Societies fell, while attempts at new ones never stuck. Peace appeared to have stripped itself from the earth. Now years after the first cleanse, the world has changed forever. Anarchy rules and justice has fallen.

## II

The Ration Centre is beginning to fill up when I arrive, the end of the line disappearing around its side.

The outside of the building is worn and rundown, covered in graffiti from those who felt that the act is still a sort of rebellion. As if there is some force still working to police what everyone did. The system has fallen, even further than the rocky stilts it had been built on. Some say that it's a blessing in disguise, a chance to rebuild society and its structures the right way, but the world has only gotten worse. The peace after the first cleanse was brief, one of those moments in history when the world comes together to help each other and theories of events unfolded, but then slowly people desired the move back to a new normal. One that had to be accepting of the fact that a large amount of the population disappeared without a trace.

And not just random individuals. Good ones, or at least those that most would deem to be morally good, those that had spent their lives without the infiltration of hate and ignorance within themselves. People like my dad, who had grown up tough but only in the act of always being the one who bullied the bullies. Who stood up for what was equal, what was right. Not one murderer, rapist, criminal, or abuser, had disappeared during the first cleanse, but I mean neither had I, or the majority of those I cared about. So, who knows what that means for the state of my soul; a fact that I harshly remind myself of when doing the things I have to, in order to survive.

Coming early on Ration day is not just about grabbing the best before it is gone, it is also about avoiding the conflict. To come early meant avoiding those who seek out more rations than their own, and wait around blind corners for those headed home after finishing their shopping. They don't want people's money; money is nothing but the useless square piece of paper it was always joked about being. They wanted their food, medical supplies, packs of Aquatabs that were needed to clean the built-up contamination from the water that flows through the pipes in town. The rules of trade have changed, but the streets have not. If you have something that someone wants, they will take it. Or at least most will. Coming early in the morning usually meant that those with ill-intent were still asleep. Sleeping off their drug-induced and alcohol filled comas, choosing to wait and raid from those left at the centre later in the day.

My old sneakers make a game of kicking the loose rubble of broken sidewalk across the road as I wait in line. The gathering in-front of the centre doors is long for this early in the morning, but it is the first of the month and everyone's eager for the fresh produce. The visit to the park cost me, the line of people diminishing the hopeful recipes I had building in my head.

"...and I told you! I am picking up for two families, it is why – DON'T TOUCH—"

The sound of scuffling causes many in line to peer out towards the front. Disagreements are common during ration collection, and usually something to ignore, but I know that voice. A voice that has no business attempting an altercation with anyone, let alone the power-tripping Ration Centre security guards. My hands shove apart the shoulders that have gathered around the two men arguing. To his credit, Joh managed to evade any serious damage by the security guard. His worn-out Nikes are sliding in the dirt as he does his best to dodge the guard's attempts to grab one of the bags clenched in Joh's hands.

Joh never fought. Even when the other person deserved it. Like in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, when Nick Peterson swiped Joh's science project off the table, smashing to pieces something I know my best-friend had spent a ridiculous amount of time on. He didn't even yell at Nick, he just gave him one of his withering stares, and began to pick up what was left of his project. As if pitying Nick for the bully that he was. However, I take after my father. It cost me four bruised knuckles and a 5-day suspension, but the permanent left-curve of Nick's nose was more than worth it. I promised Joh that day to never step into one of his fights again, because *true violence towards others is never worth the consequences it has on the soul*. Or, something like that. But this was different, the second ration bag in Joh's hand meant only one thing, he noticed I was late and is attempting to take a bag of stuff for us, which to the security guard, looks like someone stealing more than their share.

Dodging the guard with a fake to the left, Joh hesitates before attempting to make a break for an opening in the crowd. I can see the split-second it costs him, the guard's arm reaching out to snatch the back of Joh's navy hoodie, pulling him back with a sharp jerk. He goes down. Hard. Joh clenches the bags tight to his body as his falls, his back taking the brunt of the impact as it knocks the wind out of him.

"Relax! .... I said, I'm delivering it," Joh's words are forced, being spoken in-between his attempts to catch his breath. "I swear I wasn't taking it for myself, you know me man. I'm here every week!"

I can't stop the smirk from forming. He has no idea who that guard is. Joh hates the Ration Centre, and I know that the only reason he even went in today was because he seen that I was late from the park bench he would wait on across the road. The guards are used to me picking up for other families, my job delivering meals-on-wheels to those who couldn't

physically make it down to the Centre working in my benefit. I was never questioned when grabbing Joh's ration bag for him, the old men with the leering eyes never looked twice at me – at least in the sense of being a thief.

"I ain't ever seen you at the centre, been here several months, nice try though," the guard smirks. Digging the heel of his boot into Joh's stomach.

I can almost see it forming on my friend's lips, knowing what is coming because he never could help himself. It's like an uncontrollable urge.

"Ain't. *Ain't* ain't really a word. Surprised someone as clearly edu—" Joh's last words are cut off as the guard delivers a swift kick to his left side. I catch the smirk on Joh's lips the same time that the guard does, and I move forward to distract from another well-placed shot.

"And this right here Joh, is why *I* am the one who collects our deliveries." My voice drawing their attention. "Marls, they switch you to the morning shifts again or they got you working the double?" My presence works as I hope, the guard's features softening into the sweet middle-aged man I had gotten to know on my weekly visits.

"Pan! Don't tell me this belongs to you?" He gestures with a hand towards Joh on the ground, causing a look of annoyance from the young man.

"Unfortunately, yes," I reply. Sighing heavily, my hand reaches out towards Joh, tugging him up from the ground amidst his less-than-quiet murmurs that the guard has lost his mind.

"Seems he was trying to do me a favour, I was running late and he was grabbing my rations for me."

Marls' ego is still obviously hurt, his eyes glancing between Joh and I, as if making connections he knew nothing about. "You aren't meant to be taking other deliveries if you aren't working one of your shifts. I could take your weekly rations just for breaking protocol, and that's without taking into consideration the fact that he put his hands on me."

"Hands on you? Are you kidding me?" Joh bursts out. My hand slapping his arm quickly in hopes he'll shut up.

"Marls come on," I say, attempting to play on his softness for me. "You know I always grab for a few families when I'm here. I've even done it for your sister a few times."

"Yah well, not anymore, one bag only from now on." He says. "And I have half a mind to go speak with my supervisor inside, tell her that you *ain't* exactly following the rules – one may say even taking advantage of your position. A position that pays in a few extra rations tossed in every month." His eyes drop to my bag, knowing that I get extra products thrown in to help with the extra time and energy spent delivering for the centre.

I knew what he wanted, and so did Joh by the stiffening of his body next to mine. He wanted extra food in exchange for staying quiet about the fight they just had. A fight that could get me fired, and Joh in trouble with whatever semblance of a law we had left. Trouble that could result in the suspension of rations, which is basically a death sentence to many families depending on how bad they were struggling. And Joh isn't exactly living the life of Riley as it is.

"Here, Marls," My hand reaching into one of the bags that Joh held, pulling out a box of vegetable crackers and a glass jar of strawberry jam. A condiment that I knew is only in there because of the work I put in over the past few weeks. "Since you were so kind in letting us off with a warning, have these. We appreciate it, and hope that you can just keep this between us?"

Marl snatches the stuff from my open hand, a satisfied smile gracing his lips as he nods and turns back to head inside the store. Joh's eyes burn into the side of my face, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of meeting his gaze. He knows that this is his fault, that I couldn't risk losing the some-what of a stable job I had found – neither of us could.

"Come on, let's just go. I promised to be home before noon today and we still need to drop some of this off at your place," I say. Reaching out, I grab one of the bags from Joh's arms. "And stop looking like a puppy I just kicked, stuff happens. Let it go, I am."

His agreeance comes in the form of a lazy drape of the arm over my shoulder, tugging me close to kiss my temple in his quiet way of apologising. Best friends since diapers, and best friends still. Always. Even if he is infuriating.

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Joh's family wasn't poor, at least in the sense of the old world. His house is the largest on the street, built in one of those ridiculously posh neighborhoods where all the houses look the same. Joh's family has the biggest lot, the house is close to the design of all the others but is slightly larger than the rest of its surrounding companions. It housed an extension the others didn't, one built onto the side by Joh's father to have his own home laboratory. A place that allowed him the ability to continue working outside of his daytime research job. It was also the one place in the house that Joh's father had chosen to spend most of his time, his son never being allowed in.

I can still remember Mom and I finding him.

Joh sitting at the end of his driveway, a day after everyone disappeared. Face red from tears, a blank far-away look in his eye. He hadn't known if his dad was gone too when he first



found out about the disappearances over the news playing in the living room. It had taken him all day to break through the door into his dad's laboratory, his fingers still bleeding when my Mom wrapped them in her scarf before walking back to our place. To this day, I can see the scarring around the tips of his fingers and the edges of his palms, torn up from prying the hinges loose in a panic, screaming for someone that could no longer answer. He stayed with us for a few years on and off. Often sneaking out of our house to go back to his, until he had eventually moved back for good. The door to the laboratory was sealed off and hidden under a layer of drywall with a bad paint job.

The back screen-door screeches its annoyance as Joh opens it, entering the code into the keypad before moving into the mudroom by the kitchen. Lights flicker on over-head as we place the bags on the counter, beginning to unload.

"Brown rice, again. Fantastic." Joh boasts. His sarcasm extremely evident. "You know, the things I would do for some noodles. Spaghetti, bow-tie, penne—really anything that I could use to make some form of pasta would really make life suck a little less."

"You know, if you would just take the time to learn how to make your own, it wouldn't be so—."

The flickering of the lights in the house cuts me off. Something that may be normal in some neighbourhoods during these times, but not Joh's home. It's backed up by one of the best generators that money could buy, his father had made sure of it.

Joh's eyes meet mine, filled with just as much confusion. "That was weird," he says.

Before I can say anything, we are both rocked to the side; the force of a loud crack echoes and shakes the sky as it tosses us off balance with its shockwave. The windows in the

kitchen shatter, glass bouncing off the countertops and onto the floor around us. My head spins as the lights built into the house's security system flicker on, turning the room a dull yellow. The house alarm blaring loudly around us as far off sirens and car alarms add to the background noise.

"Joh!" I cough, rolling onto my stomach, trying to pull my legs under me enough so I can stand up. "Johnathon!"

"I'm good, I'm okay." His voice sounds far away, as if calling to me through a tunnel, giving it an echo quality. "I got you, come on. You need to get up, there's glass everywhere. We need to get into the hall." His hands wrap tightly around my upper arms, hauling me off the ground and dragging me out of the room. My sneakers squeak across the hardwood as I desperately try to remind my body of which way is up.

"Breathe Pan, deep slow breaths. It's okay. You're fine, you just need to give your body a moment to adjust." Joh's voice is calm, the deep vibration of his words being an anchor for me to focus on. "You were right next to the window when it went off, there are some minor cuts on your face but they'll heal. I'm more worried about the blood coming out of your ear, are you sure you can hear me?"

I nod lightly, the ringing on the right side of my head slowly diminishing to a dull pounding.

"What happened? Earthquake?" I ask, using my sleeve to wipe the wetness from my ear.

"If it was, it was the fastest one on record," Joh laughs dryly. His attempt lacking its normal humour. "But no, it couldn't have been. That was something else, it sounded like the entire sky cracked open."

He gets up, walking carefully down the hall to the alarm pad to punch in the code and stop the loud blaring. It's only then that the noises from outside become clear, voices yelling and doors slamming. Not voices that are afraid of what had just happened, but one's that are still riddled with fear as people scream out names. As if searching for someone.

No. Not again. The realization of what has just happened is like a punch to my chest, my heart stuttering as I gasp and feel the blood drain from my face. I have to get home. I have to get home, now.

"Pan, stop. Think for a second, it is mania out there right now." Joh has picked up on what is happening as well, his hands now held out in front of him as if attempting to talk down a skittish deer, one he knows is about to run. "We need to be cautious."

My body acts before my mind does. He always was slow on his left, a weakness I play on as I dodge past him and run down the hall towards the front door. His footsteps are fast behind me, but my fingers work to spin the locks and he can't stop me before I am able wrench the door open. Chaos. The long road ahead is riddled with vehicles, their alarms blaring as many appeared to have shifted several feet from the loud blast. Only a handful of individuals stand amidst everything: some just staring at the sky bewildered, others desperately yelling out for loved ones. I know before I pull it out of my pocket to check that any cell service that I had rigged off the satellite phone to keep contact with Mom is now gone. I should have been home by now; I was meant to be there. I had promised.

"Come on, lets go. We can take the back trail through and cut across the old highway to your place. Main roads are too dangerous right now, and that's saying something."

Joh's voice is soft, but his grip on my shoulders is commanding. Meant to snap me out of it, to remind me to feel later and assess now. Emotions come later, processing comes later, survival has to take the now.

"Right. The trails." My mind is slow to come back, adrenaline switching from flight to fight. "Go inside Joh, grab what isn't covered in glass and put it back into the grocery bag. We still need those supplies."

"You got it, Captain," Joh gives a mock salute, before sprinting back through his front door. The beams of his emergency lights illuminating the sidewalk in-front of his house.

*She's fine. She's smart. She would have done what we practiced.*

But what if she wasn't there ... what if there is no longer anyone there ... what if it's just me? The thoughts try their best to pull me back into a state of panic, but I slam down a wall in my mind and shove them tightly into a deep dark corner to be dealt with later.

"Okay, I think I have everything I can get. I even snagged a few of the canned goods that were in the cupboards – just in case anything at your place is ruined. If power is out on this street, I bet it is at yours, so we need to get any refrigerated things you have moved over here sooner than later," Joh calls out through the doorway, his form emerging a few seconds after with hands full of grocery bags and a white container tucked tightly under his arm.

"What's that?" I ask, motioning to what he has with him.

"What?" Confusion makes his eyes furrow as he looks down at his full hands. I motion with my head towards what is under his arm. "Oh! That's just a first-aid kit, figured we may see someone who needs help on our way to your place. Can't hurt right?"

I relax slightly for the first time since everything happened. That's Joh. Caring about others who would probably never do the same for him. It's a wonderful quality. It is also a naive one that has gotten him in trouble more times than I can remember. Taking some of the weight out of his hands I motion for him to start walking, the worn foot trail we created years ago as kids leading us into the forest lining the back-edge of his yard. Tightness in my chest hastens my footsteps as we dive into the tree line, she must be okay, she must be there.

*Please*, I beg. Sending the plea sky-ward, willing to put faith into anything right now.

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The trail is as empty as usual, but it's the roaring of an engine that causes us to hesitate before crossing the pavement of the old highway. Not many people use it, and the ones that do are not souls Joh or I want to ever meet face to face. The overhang of a tall arbor gives enough cover that we are both able to camouflage into it and duck down into the deep ditch. The road begins to vibrate as the vehicles get closer, and it is clear now that there is more than just one or two. In fact, it sounds like an entire fleet coming down the road.

The first vehicle speeds across the front of our look-out point, its full size just barely visible from our low vantage point. Military. Or at least the vehicles anyway. They are tagged in bright hunter orange but moving too fast to clearly see the symbol spray painted on the side, although I don't need to. The group had made its logo clear when they first appeared in the area a few years ago. There were rumours about groups trying to claim territory, setting up smaller communities, but this group is different. They didn't just want to set up base somewhere, they believed in purity. Or at least their messed-up version of it, the group took it upon themselves to

decide who should have been cleansed from this earth, and who can be saved through the teachings of their appointed leader. A lot of the men involved also seem to make it a point to *spread their seed* under the guise of a higher power's will, claiming as many as they want, even if their chosen partners are unwilling. They can try to deny it all they want, but it's always been clear the group has their hands in the sex trade in some way or another.

Seven more vehicles pass before we both deem it safe enough to crawl out of our hiding spot. Our feet creating small avalanches of loose pebbles as we scale up the side of the ditch onto the road.

Joh claps his hands to rid them of dirt and squints towards the black shapes fading in the distance, scoffing loudly. "Got themselves a whole fleet, don't they? Do you think what is left of our joke of a military base just handed them over because they asked nicely?" The sarcasm is heavy, but the steel to his voice makes it obvious that he isn't kidding.

"Maybe no one was home when they went knocking?" The question hidden within my words is clear. If a self-proclaimed righteous group can take off with a fleet of militarized vehicles, just how much protection is left for us now? How many are gone?

"Contemplations later Pancake, walking now. The last thing we need is to be caught standing here, like dazed deer in headlights when the next thing that wants to kill us shows up".

He strides off into the bush on the opposite side of the road. The thick greenage swallowing him up quickly, and the only sound being his awkward crashing through the dried bushes.

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The lights are on in the house, beams illuminating the lawn. A good sign. The living room curtains are still pulled back, as they always are for her days spent staring out the panes, but now the windows are gone. The large front panes that curved with the structure of the home are missing, and remnants of the glass is scattered on the garden below. Listening closely, I hear the sounds of her kitchen radio that she always keeps on, but no music flowed from the speakers now, only a loud buzzing of white noise meets our ears as we approach the front door.

"Pan, let me go in first. I'll go in and confirm that she's still here. Probably make your mom feel extremely awkward for showing up unannounced as usual, and report back. She loves when I do that."

My head is already shaking to deny his proposal before the words finish leaving his mouth. "No," I say, gulping down the knot of emotion in my throat. "I need to do this."

*She is probably still in her room, I argue with myself. Convincing my arm to reach up and open the front door. No, she would be outside in the yard, like I taught her to if there ever was another one. She knew where to go, she knew what to grab, and she knew to wait for me.*

My key slides into the handle of the door, and with a quick push I'm now standing in my front hall. The buzzing sounds of the radio so loud that the static enters into my thoughts, confusing me, making me hesitate as I try to decide what to do next. The noise suddenly shuts off, allowing my mind to clear, and my eyes meet Joh's as he stands in the kitchen with his hand on the power bar, a sad look in his eyes. The act of him brushing passed me into the house slipping my notice.

"Are you sure you got this, I ca-"

My hand cuts him off as I throw it up to stop his talking. "Shh, listen. Do you hear that?" Since the noise of the radio static died, another sound from upstairs can now be heard.

"Is that another radio? It almost sounds like static." Joh's forehead is scrunched as he leans towards the staircase to upstairs. "No, it's not that, it's water. The shower is on."

My feet act before my thoughts do. Dashing up the old hardwood steps, I use my hands to pull myself up on the railing as my body fills with the need to go faster. She's okay. Maybe just a little hurt from the windows exploding, she always stands so close when she stares out them. Probably had to shower off, clean herself up, before going out to wait for me to get home.

The bathroom door is locked in the hallway, and the handle jiggles loudly as I try it.

"Mom! I'm here, let me in!"

The only sound that I hear is the heavy breathing of Joh behind me. Moving past him, I open the wooden door to her bedroom, the lock having been broken after a frustrated episode on my part when she had refused to leave the room for weeks. Her bedroom has its own door to the bathroom, and its handle gives in easily to my request as I enter the space.

"Mom? Are you okay?" My voice is stronger than I feel. My eyes span over the housecoat and pajamas I had seen her in this morning, pooled into a pile on the floor next to the shower. "Can you at least answer me, please?"

"Pan, listen to me." Joh's voice is soft, pitying even. "I don't think she's in there. Just think about it for a second."



"Come on Mom," I interrupt Joh, shaking off his comforting hand. "Joh's here too, but I swear I'll open this curtain!" My hand shakes as I grip the edge of the fabric, breathing deep as I stare into the pattern of the shower curtain.

"It's cold in here Pan. The mirror isn't fogged over, the air isn't steamy," Joh says. "The hot water ran out...because no one was here to turn it off."

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### III: Ez

Location: Northern Claybelt Forest, Ontario, Canada

*The first seal is opened, and the sound that follows it is a loud bang. A strike of lightning drives down into the center of the sea of glass before the lamb, as a pure white horse appears; a giant beast with a long mane that swings low to its legs. The rider dressed to match.*

*"The first one to be called to conquer, the one who will dominate," a blurred and distorted figure shouts. Its voice sounds hoarse, yelling over the rumbling beginning within the floor. "Our first rider, our horseman."*

*A blood red wax covered the scroll next, and the moment the seal is peeled from the page, the sky above them cracks loudly. Splitting open at the top like a seam coming loose to allow a large figure to drop through the opening. The legs of the giant horse slam into the ground as it lands galloping, its body a deep red to match its rider's armour.*

*"... Judgment is coming..."*

"Ez, wake up!"

ReeRee's voice drums into my skull and shatters the nightmare that I'm trapped in, allowing my lungs to finally draw in a deep breath of air. My gasps are loud and panicked, with my vision still blurry as my eyes roll around taking in the surroundings of the tent.

"Another nightmare?" ReeRee's voice is soft as she stands next to my bed, her feet shifting weight from side to side. "You were yelling pretty loud, one of the workers heard you when they were coming off of nightshift and came to get me, which one was it this time?"

"Yea," I say after a short hesitation. Our eyes meet briefly in concern before we both look away. "Nothing changed in it either, always the same ending with that voice speaking to me."

The only response to my confession is a brisk nod from her. ReeRee never asks for details after she heard what happened in the first nightmare, in fact she intentionally demands that I won't. She feels that it is not her right to know what they are.

The first nightmare I had, had come the moment the first cleanse did a few years ago, and it had left me in a dream purgatory of hallucinations. ReeRee finding me fighting for my life in my wrecked Toyota on Highway 17 was a miracle, I had passed out the moment everyone disappeared. The cities around us soon dissolved to chaos, the small populations took too large of a hit for the economy within their communities to withstand it. Together we built the hide-away in the thickest forest we could find near us, our own haven, and collected anyone else we could.

"Right, well," ReeRee cleared her throat quickly before continuing, "Now that I know you are awake and fine, I can head back down to the storeroom. Trade needs to be picked up this morning, meet them down by the truck when you're ready, try not to take your time. .."

The end of her sentence trails off as she ducks out the flap of the large doorway in the military tent. The size of it usually meant to house a few rows of bunkbeds and an entire team of soldiers, but it had been converted into the closest thing to a real home it could be. The main space is divided into a kitchenette and living area, a small bed pushed into the back corner. It isn't much, but after being on the run for a few years, this tent and the compound with all its lost souls are the best things I had. I put everything into building this place, into seeking out those who would do best here, and into keeping ReeRee and everyone else safe. People that were left over after the first cleanse a few years ago seemed to be drawn here, individuals showing up randomly after leaving the cities to avoid the crime and make an attempt to start over.

Which is why the second cleanse hit us all so hard.

It had been a week since we lost so many to another mass disappearance, this one accompanied by a loud crack that had shaken down tents and thrown all those in the entire compound off their feet. Everyone is in overdrive, and it has been a buzzing hive of activity since.

The low chatter of life greets my ears after stepping out, my ball cap pulled low over my brows in an attempt to get down to the convoy without having to address too many questions about things I can't answer. The dull throbbing behind my eyes being a reminder of what had tormented me that morning, and now dulls my thoughts into a foggy haze. I pass through the tents designated for living, grouped together with pathways acting as small roads separating areas of space people claim as their own; slipping behind the refurbished Park Rangers building quietly, I hope to avoid those inside enjoying their breakfast.

"About time Ez, truck is loaded, let's get going!" The rough voice of Rick is clear over the chugging of the diesel trucks we *borrowed* to receive deliveries for the compound. His years of smoking makes it sound as if he gargled gravel at times, but he's strong-willed and has driven truck for years. He also never backs down from doing what must be done to protect us, the things that most of us can't stomach. Old Testament, no mercy, in every sense of the word.

The leap up into the truck's passenger side seems to take more effort than normal, my body still jittery from the nightmares.

"You look awful Kid, you sure you got this today?" Rick asks. The clamminess of my complexion and bloodshot eyes does not go unnoticed by the older man. "I can do this on my own you know, just another run under my belt, wouldn't be nothing at all."

"No," I snap. I quickly soften my tone with an an apologetic look after glancing over to see his defeated expression. "Sorry, no. It's okay. Besides, who knows what we are going to find, this trip is definitely not going to be routine. We just need to figure out what we are going to do if they don't meet us for deliveries this week."

Rick's hands grip the steering wheel as he pulls out of the drive, as those working the gate close it behind us. "You know that could be a blessing in disguise Ez, I don't feel right dealing with these people." His head shakes sadly as he glances over at me. "They should be taken out, not traded with."

"And you know that they are our best shot at keeping the compound the secret that it needs to be, without having to go into town," I say, hoping to keep him level-headed enough for this pick-up. "Besides, you know that those living in the city are worse, the people who steal and kill with no moral law behind it. This group may be twisted, but they do have their own messed

up understanding of morality, you just need to understand it and bend it the best you can to make trading possible."

The only response from Rick is the turning of the dial on the stereo, old rock flooding in to fill the silence as we begin the several hour drive west to the meet spot.

We had been able to get food by getting on good terms with some of the First Nations in the area. The ones still doing regular runs up north, but then things started to get really bad, and they closed the roads off to their reserves. I hadn't been able to make contact with our friends there since. Only hoping that the rumours of the Glories fighting their way into the communities were fake, or in the very least unsuccessful.

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The 8-hour trip to Upsala is uneventful.

Not just uneventful, but silent. Dead silent. No vehicles passed us on the highway through Kapuskasing and westward. We skirted the outside of Thunder Bay just in case, the roads of the city looking empty except for the skeletons of burned vehicles the closer we got to town. The city was one that still held a decent population before the second cleanse, but now cars have piled up after drivers disappeared last week, like monuments of people that no one was left to remember. If there is anyone left in the big city it wasn't visible from our spot from the outskirts, our part of the highway luckily breaking off northward before the road became too littered with debris.

The parking lot of the motel off Hwy 17 is empty of any life. Even the car of the old owner that sold cheap gas for cash is missing, as if he just never showed one morning to open up.

"Are we early?"

"No," I mutter. "If anything, a few minutes late."

"Do you think they left already?" The annoyance in Rick's voice is obvious, if they left already – taking the supplies with them – we would be driving back with an empty trailer and no plan.

"No, we've been later before. Plus, no transport tracks have pulled into the lot recently other than ours." I say, pointing to the gravel drive in front of us. "We are just going to wait, nothing else we can do. Wait, and pray someone shows."

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#### IV: Pan

##### Location: Dryden, Ontario, Canada

It has been a week since the sun turned blood red. Stealing nearly all the night and burning more of the land. It never got darker than dusk, always having that light haze at the horizon, but it was just enough for me to know that the stars are gone. All of them. Every single one.

Some days, it is nearly impossible to even find the moon. The thought of what will happen to the oceans if it disappears terrifies me, to the point I spent the last week keeping its nightly location narrowed down using my telescope. As if keeping my eye on it whenever possible meant that it couldn't be stolen away too. Like Mom. The memory of having to reach in and turn the water off haunted me, the sick act of collecting her clothes to put in the hamper like it even mattered anymore.

So, we left. Not just the house, but the city. All of it. To find something better.

*"I want to leave."*

*The realization of what I just said didn't hit me until the words left my mouth, but I knew that now that I said them, they couldn't be truer. Why stay? The city population is now basically obsolete, the Ration Center looted days after the second cleanse, and those who are left here are not souls we would miss. Our homes only holding painful memories of the family we lost. Our hometown now only a monument of everything our lives had been.*

*"Where to? My place?" Joh's questions are innocent, he hadn't picked up on what I mean. The seriousness that I suddenly felt about having to get out of the city, to go somewhere. A calling that seemed to now be screaming in my ears.*

*"No Joh, I mean leave Stoney Mountain."*

*His eyes pierce into mine as his head snaps towards me, searching them to see if I really meant it, that I really wanted to leave it all behind.*

*"Okay," he said simply, the words coming out with ease. "When are we leaving?"*

*Whatever weight had settled on my chest when telling him what I wanted disappeared. I should have known he would follow me, that he would be okay with leaving everything we knew to seek out something we hope will be better. That was Joh, loyal. Always.*

*"Now," I say, something pushing a sudden urgency into me. "We leave today, as soon as we can. You pack up anything you need and meet me back here with whatever you can carry, and we will go back for the rest if we can. Remember though, only essentials."*

*Three hours later, we crossed the city limits for the first time in my life.*

"The road is getting too packed with old vehicles Pan. I don't know how much farther we can go before we need to find some backroads that may be a bit better to pass through." Joh's voice pulls me from my thoughts just in time to notice the sign declaring our recent entrance into the city of Dryden.

We had avoided the route that drove through major cities in hopes that we wouldn't get stuck having to turn around again like in Winnipeg. The second cleanse decimated most of the population left over, or so we assumed, as the few individuals we seen out were far and few between. Most busier roads are littered with overturned abandoned vehicles; we had attempted to go through the capital city, dodging things slowly, but those still on the streets leered at us through our windows as we passed by. Greedy eyes staring at the vehicle I commandeered for us. The back obviously full of whatever supplies we had. After the close call of having the back-side window almost broken as someone attempted to get inside, we decided to avoid any areas that may still be even remotely populated.

"This *is* the back-way around Joh, unless we try some unmarked roads, but we don't have the gas mileage to play around. If we can't find a working pump in this town, I am going to have to find us another vehicle to take."

The uncomfortable noise that leaves Joh makes me laugh, shaking my head at him as I can tell what I said didn't sit well.

"Another vehicle? We can't just keep stealing everything as we go Pan."

"And why not?" I ask, humour filling my voice. "Will people suddenly pop back in and want their stuff back?"



"Ha. Ha." He says dryly. "Whether people are here or not, this stuff still isn't ours. Besides, other people may still be around, and we are just taking all the good vehicles!"

"Yah well, if anything that my mom believed is true, no one is coming back and those still around aren't exactly upstanding citizens," I say. My throat tightening at the mention of my mother. The topic being one I've avoided for the past several days. "She always said it was coming you know, the end of the world or whatever. She would read the Revelations chapter to dad and I, over and over, as if we kept forgetting it. Not sure how we could, the images creeped the heck out of me as a kid."

Joh lets out a short laugh, his body seeming to tense at my words. My brows furrowing as I take in the change in his demeanor.

"You good?" I ask. "I was just talking, you know I don't really believe in that story—or at least see it as something to take verbatim."

"No, it's not that...it's just, do you ever wonder if they knew more than they were letting on? Our parents?" he asks, keeping his eyes on the road in front of him. "I mean, all that research my dad was doing with his work, I know it had something to do with space. And those late-night conversations they would tell us to go upstairs for... "

"Maybe, my dad did spend the last few months before he disappeared glued to his telescope. Sometimes it seemed like he would go days without sleeping, too busy locked up in his office tracing his maps," I explain, lost in memories of tiptoeing out into the hall to watch him work from the crack in the open office door. "I do remember that they argued though, something I never heard them do before. Whispered bickering would flood up the stairs from the living room, but I could only catch small snippets of it. When I heard it then, I just thought it was

about mom going off again on her rants about the world events foretelling of what is coming, and dad doing what he could to rationalize it all. To calm her down, and make her see sense."

"But what if it wasn't?" Joh pushes, glancing at me quickly. "What if they were actually arguing about something real, something they knew was coming."

"What does it matter if they were anyway?" I burst out. My heart seeming to constrict at the idea that my parents hid something from me for this long, that my mother had chosen to feign ignorance for years. "All you're doing is asking questions about people we can never ask the answers for. They're gone Joh, if they knew anything, they couldn't stop it. And if my mom was right in any way, then us still being here when all of our family is gone speaks terrible things about the state of our souls."

Joh is silent, his mouth opening and closing a few times like he wanted to say something.

"Pan, I really think you need to know—"

"Joh please," I cut in as I let out an exasperated sigh. My fingers come up to massage my temples in frustration, trying to rub out the headache I can feel starting behind my eyes. "I can't, okay? Just drop it, no more parent talk. Let's focus on driving through the best clear path we can find and keep an eye out for a gas station that looks like it might still have power to the pumps."

The only reply I get from him is silence and the tight clench of his jaw as he swallows down the annoyance of wanting to snap back at me.

It is another several minutes of tense driving on the road, almost to the point of exiting Dryden on the other side, that I see an Esso with several pumps lined up. One of those stations

that allows for passenger vehicles and transports to fill up. The large parking lot holding an old Tim Hortons that has clearly been looted.

The light is on at the pump that we pull up next to, looking like it normally should, and it sparks hope in me for the first time that morning.

"Looks like it has power, now let's just hope it has gas!" Joh hops out from the SUV as I open the passenger door. Legs creaking as I stretch them after the long 8-hour drive we've been on. Going all through the night on pure adrenaline.

"Pan, it's working!" Joh exclaims from the other side of the car. "Here fill it up, I'm going to go see if there is anything left inside and use the washroom. Fingers crossed there's toilet paper!"

My laugh is loud, almost startling as it has been so long since I truly felt okay. Or at least in a state that wasn't constant panic. Whatever inside me that has been screaming to go seems to be satisfied for now, the feeling of being on the road filling me with a sense of freedom that I've never felt before.

Setting the pump to fill the tank, I take some time to walk around. Taking in the surroundings of the town around me. The landscape is just as dry and dead as everywhere else we've driven, the edges of the lakes we passed exposed. The water is drying up at an alarming rate, large lakes now half the size of what they used to be and smooth like glass. No current or waves causing the surface to break. No rain to refill the levels. No creatures splashing in the water. Even the idea of hunting now seems like a thing of the past, wild animals appearing to have either disappeared as well, or maybe all died from heat exposure and lack of food. Either way, it seems that those left are down to whatever prepackaged food still exists. We are so lucky

that we got the rations when we did, those combined with what the both of us had stored away gives us enough supplies for hopefully up to a month.

The sound of the oncoming engines doesn't register with me until I can see the fleet of them coming at us from down the road. *No, we are miles from their basecamp. There is no way they come out this far.* But the black military vehicles are too familiar for me to be wrong, the spray-painted symbol we witnessed the day of the cleanse still bright on its side.

"Joh! Johnathon! Get your ass out of there now, we need to go!" I scream. Sprinting back around the side of the SUV, I stop the fuel pump before spinning the cap back on and jumping into the driver seat. The door of the Esso has yet to open, my hand laying on the horn as I see the trucks getting closer to the parking lot in the rear-view mirror. There is no way the Glories haven't seen us by now, acting discreet is out the window. I have to get Joh's attention before they reach us.

"Dammit," I curse.

Throwing it into gear, I whip around the side of the pumps and pull up as close as I can to the store's front doors, still laying on the horn in rapid taps. The engine of the large diesel military trucks is loud, the sound of their tires eating up the road nearly on top of us. Knowing I can't wait any longer, I kick open the driver's door, leaving the engine running and take the chance to dart into the store.

"Joh, where are you! Glories, incoming!"

A loud curse from the store's backroom gives away his location, the sound of scattering canned goods follows before Joh comes running towards me with his backpack bulging. Zipping it up as fast as he can before slinging it over his shoulders.

"Here? Why are they so far East?! Last I heard they were only after prairie territory!"

"I don't know, but let's just go before they decide they want to have one of their *chats* with us."

The vehicles are already lined up at the diesel pumps by the time we get back outside. The occupants watching us walk up to our vehicle, Joh reclaiming his spot in the driver seat. The feeling of being stared at has shivers running down my back, but I force myself to ignore the urge to look up at the Glories. Dressed in their matching shirts, bright logos stitched on the left breast.

"Anytime now Joh," I breathe, keeping my eyes locked on the windshield in front of me.

"Would love to Pancake, just toss me the keys."

His hand is outstretched, waiting for me to drop them in. Eyes glancing over at me when he notices my hesitation. The blood draining out of my face as I stare into the empty slot of the ignition.

"I left it running."

The widening of Joh's eyes tells me he's caught on to what happened when we were in the store. "Oh," he says slowly, swallowing loudly. "Right. Well, guess I'll just ask nicely if they can give them back, then." His hand grips the door handle as he prepares to get out, but I grab his shoulder tightly. My hand shaking as I stare at the growing crowd of Glories circulating our vehicle, one motioning towards the door as if telling us to open it.

"Lock the door. Now." My hands slam down on door locks for the passenger front and back doors. "Joh, I'm not kidding, do it."

"Okay, okay. Just calm down." The lock of the driver's side engages the moment those surrounding the vehicle begin closing in. The tall man closest to Joh's door motions again for him to open it, waving for us to come out. His face blank and passive, not letting on to anything that they may want from us.

Joh's hands are propped up on the steering wheel, palms open towards them, as he gives the people outside the vehicle a reassuring smile. "I think they just want to talk," Joh reasons. "You stay here, I'm going to get out and talk to them for a second."

"No, Joh don't. Don't be stupid."

His hand waves me off as he sends another smile to the man on the other side of his door and slips off his seatbelt, motioning to those outside that he is going to get out.

Whatever urge inside of me that told me to leave before, is now screaming to run. Time slows, and I can see the quick movement of the men as Joh is opening the door before he does, but the warning scream catches in my throat. His door is quickly jerked open, and the long baton that was hiding behind one of the Glories' backs is brought down hard across the top of Joh's head. His unconscious body crumpling to the ground like a puppet who lost its strings. The back of his head making a sickening thud as it hits the pavement, the noise like a sledgehammer driving the air from my lungs.

"No," I gasp. Clawing forward over the front seat, I forget about the men surrounding us and focus on the dark red blood leaking down from the side of his head. Diving out the open driver's door, my body drops hard onto the pavement, arms wrapping tightly around Joh as I check to make sure he's breathing. Small shallow ones can be felt from his open mouth, filling me with relief that he is alive.

"Get up."

The voice is hard, his words not a request, but I find myself shaking my head, denying him. Wrapping my body closer to Joh like a shield, my arms cradling his head as I try to slow the bleeding.

A low chuckle comes from the set of dark leather boots that I can see from my place on the ground. "Have it your way then."

I can hear movement above me, and I look up in time to see the black blur of the baton coming down across my temple.

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V:Ameira

Location: Lakeville Corner, New Brunswick

"Your first misconception was believing that I wouldn't notice your weird behaviour over the past week. Predictable, as usual."

I can tell that my voice startles him from packing up the truck in our garage, but he has yet to turn around and face me. The slumping of his shoulders signaling his defeat, knowing his plans are ruined now that I'm here.

"I don't remember deciding to split ways, but then again, your mind has seemed full of secrets ever since you started speaking to those people on the radio. Perhaps you simply forgot to mention it?" My sarcasm is heavy, tone tight as he spins to meet my eyes. "Completely understandable, considering I've been so busy picking up all this slack you've been leaving—"

"—a wonderful job, I am extremely thankful for that, but Ameira—"

"—for whatever reason you have chosen to keep from me," I continue. Forcing myself to stay strong and ignore his interruption. "After everything we have been through, you were really just going to leave?"

I hate my voice for softening the way it does on my question to him, revealing the emotion behind my words that my lips tremble to keep back. I want him to see the hurt I feel after waiting all week to see if he was ever going to fess up to what was going on, instead I walked into our room tonight to see a portion of his clothes missing and a letter laying on my pillow.

"I will come back, Ameira. You know I would never leave you forever. Leave our community. Our home."

I scoff, unable to hold his gaze at his words.

"*Will* come back?' So, you're still going to go?"

I can feel his determination before he speaks his answer.

"Yes, I am," he says, voice low. "You can feel it too, don't deny it. The world is changing again, and people are disappearing like before. It has been seven years of silence, seven years of rebuilding our small city the best we could. And we did what we set out to do, the families we gathered here have found some semblance of peace. Something resembling normalcy, a feeling of community, but I can feel it in my bones that something is coming. The visions have changed and I believe that because of that, so has my purpose."

"Our purpose, Mahd."

His head is shaking in defiance, but I wave it off before he can deny it.



"Yes, it is ours. I have been by your side since the beginning, and promised you I will be there until the end. Same as you to me," I say. Walking forward, I place my hand on his chest and bring the other up to cup his chin lightly. Forcing his eyes to meet mine. "Where you go, I go. Remember?"

"Okay," he sighs. His hand coming up to rest on mine, stroking my thumb softly. "You're right, as always."

"Of course, I am," I laugh. "Now, go grab my bags behind the back workbench. I've been stuffing supplies there all week while waiting for you to make a break for it. I've already packed everything I figure you probably forgot to think about. Such as food, did you honestly think you could survive off whatever snacks you've been sneaking into that canvas bag the last few days?"

Mahd's laugh is loud, rumbling through his chest as he runs a hand through his hair.

"I'd be lost without you, you know that?" He asks, smiling wide at me.

"Don't worry, I'll always be here."

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I don't know why I got my hopes up and told him to take the detour on our way out of town. It had just been so long since we heard anything from our friends, and if we were passing through town, then the least that we could do was check.

The road to the reservation had been blocked off a while ago, the trade runs they had been doing stopped once things began getting bad; however, it was the rumours of what the Glories were doing that had me really scared for all my friends who lived there. The group ran ramped across the provinces, growing more and more as they brainwashed survivors into

thinking that they are on this righteous mission. They had been trying to get past the barricades put up to get access to the resources they knew the First Nations had, but as far as we knew they had been unsuccessful in more of the attempts. The groups holding strong against the intruders, but after the latest cleanse, I worry that too many may have disappeared for them to hold back any raids.

"If we can get in contact with someone there, maybe we can tell them that they can go to our community if they need to," I say, as our vehicle comes around the bend. I can see the opening to what use to be the main road in, before they had it blocked out.

"Oh, no," Mahd whispers. The vehicle slowing as we come to a stop in front of the broken barricade. The large fencing had been crushed, by what looked like a massive truck of some sort, one that had come barreling into it at a high enough speed that it crashed through everything put up to stop it.

"They got in, the Glories, didn't they?" asks Mahd. Gulping down the pain in my throat as I stare at the wreckage, coming to terms with the fact that if there was anyone there left protecting the land, that they would have rebuilt it. Fixed their protection.

"Yes."

I hold back tears as Mahd pulls a U-turn on the road. The memories of my friends filter through my mind as I imagine where they are now, if any of them are left here, lost like us. Or if they all disappeared like the rest, leaving for their own unknown.

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As we journey west from the open ocean, the huge waterway of the Saint Lawrence narrows itself into the river that flows past Quebec City, Trois Rivieres, Montreal. The maps I have in my bag are thankfully up to date, the landscape passing by us matching the small print.

The Marina Laronde on St. Helen's Island is completely abandoned when we pull into the lot. A few raided vehicles left over from before filled some of the parking spots, but it appears as if there is no other life around for a good distance.

The docks hold boats still, bobbing in the low water waiting for their owners. Everything eerily undisturbed. I guess not many seen a reason in taking a boat out on the river, no one wanting to take such sized engines into the large shipping trade-ways and the river to the west being too shallow for their hulls.

Mahd finds what we need before I do. A small emergency raft tied to the side of one of the bigger yachts. Its bottom is flat and sleek, perfect for carving through the short depths and corners of the trip to Ottawa on the rivers.

It wasn't perfect. Neither of us have steered a boat for such a distance, let alone down a river the size of the St. Lawrence, but kayak and canoe stands had been cleaned out and there wasn't anything else that could even come close to making that journey.

It has been a few days since we left our home, and I know that those who are still around must be wondering where we are. Knocking on the front door, looking for the couple that always made sure to have all the answers over the past few years. A heavy stone drops into my gut as I do my best to shut out the intrusive thoughts, ones that worried about what will happen to those we left behind. I know we had no choice, whatever feeling we have been overcome with the past

few weeks is reassured, and the aching pull towards whatever it is seems to be satisfied with the journey we have been making.

"If we take the river west out of the city, it breaks off to the right and will head upwards before meeting up with the Ottawa River. From there it should take us really close to where we need to be, but unfortunately not all the way. The rest will have to be traveled back on the main roads," Mahd says. His finger lightly tracing a path up towards Northern Ontario.

"So, you still really believe that those people you connected with have something to do with all this? With the visions and what has been happening to everyone?" The doubt is clear in my voice, but he doesn't call me on it. He is already well aware how I feel about him being so willing to meet up with people he barely knows, especially with the type of groups running around.

"I told you Ameira, one of them has been seeing things too. Different things, but still, it can't be a coincidence."

He's right, and we both know it. Plus, the time of sitting around pretending that we can get everything back to a semi-normal way of life, like before this all started, is over. The last cleanse made sure of that.

"Well, let's just hope this boat works then, because the river needs to take us to at least the next province over, " I tell him. Giving a nod for him to try giving the cord a pull. "It's the safest way around these highways, who knows what kind of people are controlling them now."

Crossing my fingers tightly at my sides as I wait, Mahd's left arm jerks repeatedly as he tries to get the engine going. The sound of the motor fires to life after a few tense moments, shattering the silence around us.

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VI: Ez

Location: Upsala, Ontario, Canada.

Crunching gravel wakes me up from the light nap I fell into after waiting so long for the delivery.

"Rick, wake up. They're here." I say, nudging his shoulder roughly. "Come on, let's get this over with so we can finally go home."

Annoyance at having to wait so long at the meet-up point is diminished by the fact that they have shown up. Better late than never, this trade connect is just too important to lose.

"How you doing? Glad to see that you are some of the few still around!" I try, hoping to soften the awkward tension that lingered whenever we met with them.

They hardly ever spoke, other than to confirm that delivery was complete and to tell us when the next shipment would be coming. Today is no different, my question going unanswered. A few of the men choose to walk to the back of the military trucks and begin moving the supplies over to our trailer, taking the boxes of fresh produce that we traded them in return. Our greenhouse set-up being one of the only ones that seemed able to grow anything for miles. Another thing ReeRee saved us all with, she seemed to be able to nurture life into almost anything that needed it.

Rick gives me a look, one that says he is still just as uncomfortable about these people as he was when we left the compound earlier today.

*Please don't do anything. Don't say anything, let's just get the supplies we need and go,* I think towards Rick. Trying to project my thoughts to him while doing my best to keep my face passive, he knows this meet-up is extremely important. Wagering the crates of medical supplies with this shipment has cost us more of our food rations than I had ever wanted to offer, but there are too many at the camp that need it. Especially the boxes containing insulin, something that was nearly impossible to find for the last while.

Tension is riddled throughout Rick's body, and his eyes keep shifting over everyone there, taking in the logo spray painted across their vehicles, as if waiting for something to happen. His eyes flick towards me, trying to hint that the vibe in this deal is making him feel more anxious than normal. He wasn't wrong. Something is different this time, I can feel it. It may have had nothing to do with us, but something has them on edge.

"Last truck at the back of their convoy," Rick's words are low, making it obvious they are only meant for me. "It's like they are guarding it, something's in there."

I focus on the truck he mentions, the back flap of the cargo area is being watched by several of the Glories. Two laugh quietly to each other as the third leans near the opening in the back, gripping the shotgun in his hand tightly.

"Not our business Rick, focus on the plan."

"You heard the rumours about those missing girls too," he whispers back. "No chance we're leaving without checking the back of that first."

Rick is right. Whatever is in there, they don't want us to easily happen upon it, and if even the tiniest bit of those rumours were true, then we needed to get a glimpse of whatever is in the bed of the truck.

"I'll distract them, you try and get a peek." Rick strides off towards their other vehicles before I fully comprehend what he is saying. Never one to mind his own business, especially when it comes to dealing with such shady individuals. By the time panic sets in, it is too late, he has flung one of their doors open and hopped into the driver seat.

"You know, when I drove truck, they didn't have these baby automatic transmissions in here. We drove stick, like the engine was meant too!"

His voice trails off as he begins riffling through things in the cab, drawing the attention of those not unloading supplies. It is not until the truck rumbles to life and he begins revving it loudly while yelling about it having no horsepower, that those standing at the back of the convoy are forced to try to drag him out.

The urge to laugh at seeing Rick's antics bubbles up but I force myself to focus. Making it to the back of the truck in a few quick steps, I glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is paying attention to me before ducking under the dark green canvas flap.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness in the back of the truck, but once they do, I can make out several boxes stacked on the floor. Same as every other vehicle, the boxes are labeled as they usually are. Stepping further inside, my eyes pick up the white sole of a pair of shoes before realizing that they are attached to a body, and there isn't just one. Clearly unconscious by the sound of their light breathing, the two figures lay on their side with their hands duct taped behind their backs. Both with patches of what looked like dried blood on their heads.

They can't be older than 20. I didn't even want to think about why they are here, but I know we can't leave them to whatever the Glories have planned.

Kicking lightly at their feet, I attempt to rouse them without too much noise. Hoping that whatever Rick is doing is still working.

"Hey, wake up. You need to get up."

The girl begins groaning lightly as she shakes her head side to side. Her eyes rolling as she tries to focus them on my voice, widening as she finally takes her surroundings in and frantically looks around until she sees the boy laying unconscious beside her. Tension leaves her body as she moves closer to him protectively, staring at me as if trying to figure out if I'm here to help or not.

"Come on, we don't have much time. I need to get you out of here before the Glories see."

Whatever doubt she has disappeared when she realizes I'm not with the ones who did this to them.

"I won't leave without him." Her voice is rough, throat dry from being tossed around in the back of the dusty truck. Her eyes challenging me to say otherwise.

"Well then you better wake him up, now."

I can hear the voices outside the truck, sounding like they have finished loading up whatever is meant for us, and have officially noticed my absence. Frantically I begin pulling at the tape surrounding her wrists, freeing her the best I can before urging her to work on her friend.

I can hear her waking him up behind me as I lean out the side flap slightly. Looking around the end of the truck, I try to see if those who were guarding this spot before are headed back. Not yet, but the group has congregated only a few feet away. The voice of Rick trying to



explain away my whereabouts can be heard between the stern mumbling of one of the Glories, clearly not buying whatever excuse Rick is using.

"Now what?"

The question is whispered but it still startles me, coming from the boy who is now fully conscious. His eyes are bright and focused, waiting on edge for what is going to happen next.

"See that transport over there? We make a run for it. And hope that whatever reason it is that they took you, they don't fight too hard to keep you."

"Beats me man, honestly. They just jumped us out of nowhere at some gas station in Dryden."

*Good, I think. Then that means they aren't too special to the Glories. Just wrong place, wrong time, and too many tempting supplies with them.*

"On the count of three," I hold my fingers up, slowly opening the back flap of the truck once more. I lean out to scope out the location of the group.

My eyes meet those of one of the guards the moment he appears around the backside, his height high enough that we are almost at eye-level from my stance. His eyes widen as he takes me in, a confused expression on his face once he glances towards the two behind me, now completely free of their bindings.

My hand slams down over his mouth before he can get a shout out, pressing tightly against his face as I grab his jacket with one hand and try to drag him into the back of the truck with us. The other two shoot forward, wrestling him down together as we try to smother the loud sounds he is making.

The Glorie is able to get a well-placed kick into my side, knocking the wind out of me and forcing me to drop to my knees. Using his weight to his advantage, he quickly flips over, climbing on top of the boy. His large thick hands wrap tightly around the smaller man's throat. The boy's hands clawing at the Glorie as the man cuts off his airway, deep bloody lines are drawn as his nails tear at the arms of the man above him. The Glorie yelling out for help now.

"Get off of him!" The girl leaps on top of the Glorie, both arms wrapping into a headlock as her legs secure themselves around his waist. Her body tenses as she squeezes hard to avoid being shaken off by his last attempts at fighting for air. Tossing himself side to side. Her friend pulls himself up, chest heaving as he rubs the dark red ring forming around his neck.

"Enough! You're killing him!" the boy panics. His eyes are wide in horror as she holds her grip on the Glorie, his eyes rolling in his head as his movements begin to slow. "He's almost out! Let him go. We need to get out of here, now!"

Fast approaching footsteps cut off whatever she is about to say as several bodies near the truck. An unknown voice shouting out a name, one I assume belonging to the man at our feet. Knowing that we are now out of options and out numbered, I make quick eye contact with my new companions. Ensuring they are both paying attention.

"There is a transport out there, the one with the white cab. Get to it as fast as you can, any way you can. And if the worse happens, the keys are in the visor. Start the thing, and head left on the highway."

"Wait, hang on—"

I ignore the request, jumping headfirst out of the back of the truck, slamming my shoulder into the chest of the Glorie who was reaching out to open the flap. He lets out a grunt of

surprise as I land heavily on top of him, jumping up and shoving my way past the other two as they freeze in shock. Clearly not expecting the three of us to come launching out at them.

"Rick, run!"

My voice does what I hope. The remaining group of Glories turn toward me, startled at the sudden outburst and look away from Rick, giving him a chance to dart towards our truck. He is used to being on his toes for things like this, and even given his size, the man can sprint when he needed to. The girl and boy jump in through the passenger side, limbs spilling over the seats into the back of the cab to leave room for us, but Rick and I run for the rear first. Slamming the trailer's doors closed and sliding the back-lock to secure it as fast we can. The first gunshot goes off, the metal pinging over heads as we duck down low next to the trailer tires. The next are let off in a rapid succession.

"You're driving!" Rick yells at me, tossing the keys so that I have no choice but to snatch them out of the air. "Don't think, just go!"

I hear him run to the passenger side of the truck as I dart up the left. It is not until I jump into the driver's seat that I realize Rick is not sitting normally beside me. His door remains open as he hangs off the side of it, the sound of the gun in his hand returning the Glories' fire shocks me. I hesitate as they fire at each other, staring in horror at what the meet-up turned into before I am able to get the keys in the ignition and throw it into first gear. Gaining speed in this old thing is slow, doing my best to jump as many gears as I can while aiming the vehicle towards the road. Trying not to run over anyone, even if they were Glories.

"Rick," I scream. "Get in the truck!"

His ignores me as he continues to fire from his handgun, Glories jumping out of the way as we fly pass. The truck headed for the highway that will take us home, Rick only pulling himself into the cab once the clip emptied itself. The Glories now specks on the side of the highway behind us.

"What was that? Rick, what was that?!"

"It was what it had to be Ez. You're the one who decided to pick up two strays."

His words are rough, but I know that Rick wouldn't have left them behind either. He may get his wrong and right confused sometimes, but his heart is always in the right place.

"A gun? Really? You know I don't allow those at the compound. No weapons, especially ones like that. Even if it did save our butt today."

"It's why I kept it in the truck," he says chuckling slightly, grabbing at his side with a wince. "Loophole."

I can't help but focus in on his complexion, now pale and clammy. His hand grips his side, where there is now a dark stain covering the front of his navy-blue shirt. Noticing my worry, Rick shrugs it off before I can say anything.

"Yea, yea. I know. I pulled a hero move, and now I'm paying for it. Calm down and get me back to the compound, I'll be fine."

Voices in the backseat seem to reply to Rick, but I can't make out exactly what they are saying. The air has gotten thick, as if filling with electricity and my vision begins to go fuzzy. Ears filling with static as the lights on the transport's dash began to flicker.

"Pan, do you feel th—"

Whatever is said next by the boy in my backseat slips away as I feel myself fall into darkness. The feeling of a vision sucking me down the drain, no matter how hard I fight it. The last sounds I hear being the loud screeching of transport tires and the screams of those around me.

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*The scene continues as if it never ended and the air seems to vacuum in on itself for a moment, before a third rider bursts out into the circle. The horse is a shimmering onyx black, its deep eye sockets empty and appearing as two dark coals burning within its long skull. The rider held a pair of scales in his hands*

*The wax on the 4<sup>th</sup> seal peels off, appearing to echo in the silent room, but the vision begins to dim before anything else can happen. The edges of the scene darkening, zooming up and out on the events being unveiled. The images fading as a grey haze takes over.*

*"..The Period of Transition is here, judgement will fall on those who must be tested..."*

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I buried Rick underneath the biggest tree I could find near the wreck.

The tall pine reaching up, as if trying to touch the sky. He loved nature, and trees, the idea that they could be connected to everything through their roots. I hope that by doing so, it will allow him the chance to return to the earth. He had saved our lives, saved those in the compound too because of the supplies. Or at least he would have, but the transport rolled during the crash and the trailer had come unhinged. The entire rig plunging several meters down the

quarry side. Still intact, but the ability to bring everything back to those who need it anytime soon has been ruined.

My fault. All of it. The deal gone bad with the Glories. Transport crashing. Rick dying. With nothing to show for it, nothing to bring back to anyone still left at the compound.

"Not to be the one trying to move this along or anything," Joh's voice breaks the silence that has muted us for the last several hours. "What now, exactly? We are still going back to this camp you promised, right? Because if not, my friend and I really need to be moving on, I get you lost somebody but—"

"Joh! Enough."

Pan's voice is rough as she glares down her friend, my body and mind too tired to react either way.

"It's okay, he's right," I say, shaking my head to rid myself of guilty thoughts. I need to switch back into the mindset of the leader, the one who has to get back to the people he promised to help. "We've scaled down and grabbed everything we could carry back up from the trailer, but all that effort will be useless if we don't find something that can carry it back to the encampment."

Nodding in agreement as she stands and brushes herself off, Pan begins to take stock of what we were able to gather. The pile looks smaller than ever now that we are focusing intently on it.

"Well, it may not be much," she sighs lightly. Her head tilting to the side as she surveys everything. "But it is still enough that anything sedan sized or smaller isn't going to work. We

need something with a lot of interior space, but it also can't be a gas guzzler. The less gas stations we have to hit along the way, the better."

"Wait, another round of *borrowing* our rides, Pan? You promised that—"

"I don't like it either," I interject. "But if she can do it, and in a way that will not hurt anyone, then we need to let her. People are counting on us, and I swear I will make sure to leave it where someone else in need can find it when we are done."

The strain on Joh's face eases a bit at my promise, his head nodding even though he eyes refused to move from their focus on the ground in front of him.

"Pan, you should know that the road is basically a straight shot, but it's the hills that will slow us down and put a lot of strain on whatever it is you can get. Make sure it can handle it, plus the roads to our little spot are not exactly smooth," I say.

"You got it. I'll be back yea?" Her question directed towards Joh. "The town is small around here, I doubt I will run into much trouble. I'm sure I'll be able to find something quick—"

Joh scoffs loudly, turning towards the pile and beginning to sort through it. "Yea, for sure. See you when you get back or whatever. Try not to get kidnapped by some creep and sold to the highest bidder." He shrugs off the hand that Pan places on his arm in concern.

Pain flashes through her eyes and I do my best to avoid letting her know I had seen it.

"Okay, stay safe. Even though I am fully confident that you can handle yourself, try not to take too many stupid risks." I say. "And don't hurt anyone, or take something that others may need."

Nodding, Pan grabs her backpack from next to the make-shift firepit we had made to keep the bugs away. Her form quickly disappearing as she climbs up and out of the deep side-ditch we had settled in. Joh's dark eyes follow her from his place knelt next to the supplies, his hands stilled over what he had been grabbing next.

"If she doesn't come back, I blame you." His voice is calm, to the point of being eery. Joh's eyes staring into me as if swearing himself an oath.

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## VII: Kol

Location: Atlantic Ocean, Off the Coast of Newfoundland, Canada

I am a few hours past the normal time that I would call the morning meeting with everyone on the top deck, and the ceiling of my room creaks as the heavy boots of my crew travel back and forth above me. The dust from the beams falls down as the gathered group shifts overhead. They are waiting for their Captain, all anxious to hear what will come next in our journey.

"Captain?" Greer calls out. He must have been sent down here by another crewmember to call me out of my room. His hand twists the bedroom knob back and forth, checking to see if I still have it locked. "It's getting close to noon now, we need to decide if we are shipping out or keeping anchor down for another night ... plus, everyone is really looking forward to hearing about your plan to find us more supplies, you know, the plan you keep claiming to have all figured out for us?"



I don't miss the condescending tone he picks up when choosing to mention my plan, a tone that causes a ripple of ice down my spine. Greer's mocking statement makes it obvious that they have been speaking doubt about me, something I knew I need to nip in the bud as soon as possible. Ideas can move quickly through a group, especially one like ours that is all pent up on our own paranoia and struggle for survival. A survival that has only been possible so far because of everything I have done for them; I have the ship, I have the knowledge of the ocean, I had the trade connects, and I definitely know a lot more that they have yet to discover.

Months spent on the ocean has left us with little supplies, the crew's grumbling at dinner the past few nights made their annoyance of that fact very clear. They are tired, irritable, missing food that actually has some colour to it, a taste that didn't come out of a can, but we had raided as many ports as we could over the last few weeks. Beating off anyone we found during our raids, attacking first to ensure we got what we needed. All the trade that we had managed to set up ended during the last cleanse. I was standing on the ports of the docks, watching those who ran our shipments load with the help of my own crew. Then suddenly a loud blast, and so many just faded into nothingness, the space where those I had worked with for years now empty. There was nothing I could do to stop it, or bring them back, and the ability of finding more lost souls that I could convince to join us was impossible due to the population dying. Babies stopped coming almost immediately after the first cleanse years ago. No reported pregnancies anywhere, and since then, infertility has become a universal issue.

My hand grasps the knob and turns it quickly, the cabin door swinging open fast enough to startle Greer on the other side. I meet his eyes in an unblinking stare as I step swiftly into the hallway and line my boots up close with his. Our faces a few inches apart.

"Morning Greer, don't remember ordering a wake-up call today," I drawl, my voice cold. His eyes show a quick glimpse of fear before he puts back up the walls that he has been trying to build against me, but it is the step back that he takes that reveals who still has the upper hand.

Greer may tower over me, but he knows that size means nothing, and experience means everything. He has experienced enough of my angry episodes to know better, they all have.

"The crew is waiting for their normal briefing, and we—"

"Yes," I cut in. "I heard you before, you want to know the details of my plan." Greer's mouth opens to give a retort, but my hand waves it off, choosing to ignore the look he gives me. "Which is a desire I am already well aware of, and have already said that you will all be informed when the time is right."

"Of course, Captain. We do understand that, but we are still worried that the longer we sit here, the worse things will get, and we won't even make the trip to get the supplies."

"See, I'm trying to sympathize with you here Greer, but your tone from earlier still seems to be stuck in my head. How funny. Maybe it might better for you to worry more about that right now, instead of telling me how to run my ship?"

Greer's face pales as I brush past him. My old steel-toed boots landing heavy on the ship's old ladder rungs as I climb towards the upper deck, refusing to look back.

I can't tell him that I share their worries, that I can confirm that he is right. Our supplies are already so low that I know we will need to make some tough decisions in the near future. We will have to choose who will get to stay and who will have to be left behind to try and make it on

their own. We won't be able to feed everyone, and Greer as my second-in-command knows this. He just doesn't want to be the one to tell the others.

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### VIII: Pan

Location: Near Kapuskasing, Ontario, Canada

"A soccer mom van?"

The disbelief in Joh's voice is loud, and my teeth pinch my tongue hard as I push down the rude retort that I have loaded at the comical look on both of their faces.

"No. It's a Toyota Sienna," I bite out through gritted teeth. "They're good vehicles. Towing capacity is there, and the engine is the 3.5L, it has more than what it takes to overcome the hills and load." My voice is defensive. A part of me already soft for the van I had found inside one of the garages in the nearby neighbourhood.

Ez and Joh exchange glances, both doing nothing to hide the smirks on their faces as they silently make fun of what I managed to bring back.

"Wow, how cute, you two get along," I say dryly, my face mocking while taking a protective stance in front of the van. "Listen, I'm taking it. Silver's been locked up inside some stupid cookie cutter house's garage, I promised to show it a good time."

"Silver?" Joh laughs, as Ez covers his with a cough. "You named it?"

"Yes, well, it wanted to be named, and I—" I cut myself off. Forcing myself to swallow down the embarrassment that is making me stutter. "You know what, take out the seats and load

it yourself. I'll be taking a rest in the front, since I did do all the hard work. You're welcome, by the way."

"Thank you!"

Ez's call loses its appreciation the moment I hear them both dissolve into smothered laughter. I want to reply but I am already beginning to fall into my exhaustion as I pull myself into the front passenger's seat. The town was a lot further away than I had expected, but thankfully it appeared completely empty. The upper neighbourhood homes I combed through had been abandoned for a long time, and it was the lucky combination of finding some half-full gas cans throughout the garages that I was even able to get it back here. My eyelids have turned into little weights I can no longer fight, my eyes slowly drooping closed as I watch the two begin loading things in the floor of the van. The back hollowed out to fit everything inside.

"It'll go, give it a good shove. Here watch ..."

"Darn it Joh! You could have cracked the casing on that, would you move..."

A smile crosses my face at their voices, finally allowing myself to give in to the sleep my body is demanding.

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"It's left."

"It's straight. I'm telling you, the map says it's the next pull off," Joh argues. "I'm going straight. "

I can feel the van creep forward as I pull myself out of sleep.

"If you don't turn that wheel, I swear..."

"You even said yourself that the trees and everything looks different, so we go with the map. It just makes sense, Ez!"

Opening my eyes, I can see that we are stopped in the middle of the road, nothing around us except an old dirt path breaking off on the left. I must have moved at some point during the drive, working my way into the back to curl up on one of the softer duffel bags packed amongst all the supplies. Joh and Ez both occupy the front now, the two arguing over directions with widely pointing arms.

"I don't care what the maps say, I know it is this way –"

"Yet you just said that nothing looks familiar to you because of how much it's changed," Joh cuts in, his words laced with a mocking tone.

The tension in the van rippling now, causing me to lurch forward while sticking my head between the two front seats.

"Not that falling asleep to you two fighting, and then waking up to it as well, wasn't enjoyable, but do you think you could give it a break for a bit?" The smile is tight on my face, my words come off joking but my tone is riddled with annoyance. "What's the issue? Why aren't you just following Ez's directions?"

Ez smirks to himself in the front seat, eyeing Joh's reaction.

"I told him, we need to take another way in. I'm not going through town without knowing what we could be walking into," Ez says.

Joh cuts back in, a hand in Ez's face as he continues. "Going off course, into an area that our map doesn't even show, is a dumb idea –which you would know Pan, if you weren't sleeping the entire time after your wonderful little solo adventure."

*Okay then, he's still angry.*

"What Ez says makes sense to me." My voice has a bite to it, one that I want to take back after I use it, but he really needs to drop his damn attitude. "Trust that he knows where he is going. Take the turn."

"Fine," Joh grits out. Turning the wheel sharply onto Chain of Lakes Rd, the van bumping harshly over the rough terrain. "But if we get stuck, I'm not pushing."

"We'll be fine. Follow this one road down until it meets up with CSR 4 Slack Rd, then take the first right, then first left, and drive until we hit the river. But that's all I'm telling you for right now, last thing I need is for you both to take off toward—"

"Toward what?" I question. Searching the bags in the back for something to eat, I pause and turn around when I feel the van slow to a stop. "Ez?"

"Ez, you okay?" Joh waves a hand in front of the other man's face, watching as he stares blankly out the windshield. His breathing is rapid and a sheen of sweat has broken out on his forehead. "Pan, he's completely out of it. What do we do?"

I can feel the air thickening, static making the hair on my arms rise. "Joh, Joh it's happening again. Put the van in park, put it in park! Roll down all the windows you can, as low as they go. Hide the glass in the doorframes."

Our hands slap down the locks on the doors, Joh hitting the master switch rolling down the windows before helping me drag Ez's immobile body into the back of the van. Laying down, Joh grabs me tightly and covers all three of us with a blanket. The pressure is unbearable now, and my hands grip my head tightly as my ear drums struggle to not burst. Ez starts shaking, his body moving violently beneath the blanket as whimpers begin to leave his mouth. Slowly forming into a low murmur, he begins repeating the sentence over and over again with fervor.

*"... Period of Transition Ending ... Time of Mourning is Coming ... Time of Restoration will be the End..."*

The mouth moving is Ez's, but the voice is deep. Deeper than his could ever be, and it rips from his throat in a harsh unnatural way. The voice appearing to unhinge his jaw in the process. All we can do is look on in horror, and do our best to slow the rapid jerking of Ez's body. All of us helpless victims to the loud pounding pressure. For a second it seems to release, as if sucking all the air out of the world and taking an intake of breath before a scream.

The sound blast comes down from above, ripping through the landscape towards us. My eyes widening in horror as I see the shockwave coming, time seeming to slow as the explosion speeds up. A scream of terror claws its way out the second we are hit, the van rocking sideways and the front windshield spiders against the blast. The back window of the van exploding loudly into a shower of glass on top of us.

"You're okay, we're okay." Joh's chants of reassurance in my ear do nothing to help with the pounding inside my head from the blast. My consciousness begins to slip the same moment I feel his grip on me loosen, he too falling into an involuntary rest. Ez's body finally relaxes, his

muscles unseize as his breathing returns to normal. My hands reach out to grip both of their shirts tightly before finally allowing myself to succumb to the darkness.

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### IX: Ameira

Location: Near Englehart, Ontario, Canada.

I haven't spoken much since we began our journey by car. The desolate world around us has shocked me into silence as we drove past the barren landscape. Our world just seemed to be gone. My heart housed a deep ache for all the life that has been lost. The pain we have all felt because of this. We experienced another quake just a few days prior, the world shaking around us as we clutched each other, and I knew that even more souls must have been stolen. Figures who disappeared into nothingness.

The trek from the shores of the Ottawa River just outside the city consisted of side roads, empty of any life and filled with the skeletons of family homes. It was pure luck that we came upon JR's County Store. The small building offered a break from the constant heat and dust that we had been struggling through, the stock room in the back still housed a few cases of drinks and random snacks. Something I nearly cheered out-loud for after days of traveling along the river, stopping only at night to rest and allowing ourselves very little to eat from our supplies. It was a decent sized truck that we found in the lot, its bed tarped down and already packed up with cargo when we happened upon it. I knew there were some souls out there who had done all this work, probably preparing for a trip that was meant to lead them somewhere better. The passenger seats most likely filled with whatever loved ones they had left; the figures disappearing before they were ever able to get anywhere, leaving the truck parked at the gas station pump in a town a



few miles outside Ottawa. The gas spout still attached to the truck's tank, as if they had only pulled over quickly to fill up. My hope is that they went with the last cleanse, and it wasn't something terrible that had happened to them by those groups who claim to know righteousness.

I didn't want to take the truck, feeling that it is still somehow wrong, but we had no choice. Our travels on the waterways ended the moment the sky changed the other day. The sun was suddenly blotted out, as if all the light was sucked out of the world. I felt the change in the river, the pulling of the undercurrent as the water swirled around on itself, changing its normal course. The river beginning to drag our boat backwards with it, as if trying to take us back out to the large trading canals and the open ocean. Mahd's voice was screaming *bail* as he grabbed our bags in one hand and grasped my arm with the other, rolling both us over the side of the raft. Water rushed past our legs, the depth having already dropped several feet, the top of the water hitting our mid-thigh as we fought towards the shore. We shivered in the dark as our bright raft spun circles, destined to be lost to wherever the water was going.

Finding the truck parked next to the pumps, as wet and tired as we were, felt like a gift. The keys still plugged into the ignition. So, we filled up whatever else we would need from inside the store, but made sure to only take what will be used for the next few days and left the rest for anyone else that may need it. Since then, our days have been filled with hours and hours of driving, fingers crossed that we were heading in the right direction.

"Timmins should be coming up in the next little while, from there we can begin the trek inwards."

"Any idea how far in exactly we are even meant to be looking?" I ask, trying to tame the slight annoyance in my voice, driven by the stress of not knowing if any of this is going to be

worth it or if these people will even have any more answers than we do. "Walking with no direction and low supplies right now is a death sentence."

"I told you already I don't know, but we have made it this far. Against all odds, and the world literally crumbling around us," Mahd reasons. "Something is helping us through this, we are meant to find them. I can feel it."

I want to argue it, but I know I can't. He is right. As terrible as the last few days have been, there is a calmness in all of it. As if wherever we are headed is where we are supposed to be going. My hand finds Mahd's, and I lace my fingers loosely with his, rubbing his thumb lightly.

"You're right," I say, hoping to nip the brewing argument. His face turns towards me in a playfully shocked expression, the statement not being one he heard often from me. "Plus, I *did* agree to come with you because of what you dreamt. I believed you then and I still do, but you spoke to these alleged allies not me. I'm bound to have questions, even need a bit of reassurance, so just humour me when it comes."

"Fair," he agrees boastfully. "Let's just hope we can even make it to the beginning of the backroads, before moving on to thinking about getting lost out in the Claybelt. We still have to move through Timmins. Fingers crossed that it's empty enough we can pass by without meeting up with anyone, or even worse, hitting road blockages and having to go on foot through downtown."

"Worry if that happens, not before," I reply, before returning to scanning over the old road maps we grabbed at the County Store.

"Shit." Mahd's voice shocks me. A swear word not being something that normally ever leaves his lips. The vehicle slows down quickly, my hand slapping the dash as I am tossed forward. Our tires screeching loudly before we finally come to a stop.

His gaze is glued on the road ahead of us, his hand slowly raising to point at something that has come into view as we crested one of the large hills.

"Is that ... " My voice trails off as I lean forward, trying to take in all the debris and the large structure laying across the highway a few hundred feet away. "Is that an airplane?"

"Yah, a commercial one. Airbus or Boeing I'm assuming, ... not that it matters." Mahd trails off, still looking at what is left of the airplane strewn out across the large four lane highway. "Never seen one up close before. The pilots must have vanished while it was in the air."

"Well, now you will get to see it at an even greater scale, because there is no way around it," I joke, trying to make light of the situation. "Looks like it split itself down the middle when it landed, we can probably make it through in between."

There is a gap that can be seen in the wreckage, creating a zigzag path that we can follow. Mahd nods, slowly letting off the brakes and allowing our truck to begin its decent down the hill.

"Mahd, do you think there were people on that plane when it went down?" My throat tightens at the thought of those poor souls, my fingers twisting together anxiously.

"If there was, they are long gone. Planes have not flown for several years, that one down there is only a frame of what it once was."

The tail of the plane is laying on its side, covering half the highway at an angle. The majority of the metal on it is now worn down and rusted, the guts having been hollowed out. Only a large shadow-filled cavern gaped where the end was torn from its front.

The majority of the plane stayed with the front of it. The open back revealing the long aisles, with some areas showing remnants of seats lining the sides of the path up to the cockpit.

Mahd's sharp intake of breath startles me, flinching as he seems to take notice of something in the plane.

"What—"

"Ameira, don't look." Mahd's voice is stern. "We can't be of any help now, looking will just hurt" he says.

The truck continues forward, swerving around things in the road. My head turning to look as I try to see what he had. My heart is pounding in my chest now, breath hitching as I realize he must be talking about someone. Skeletons that he can see somewhere in the wreckage of the plane. I give up trying to look back, knowing that there must still be figures strapped into the seats of the plane; individuals who went down in a falling casket, instead of disappearing with the rest.

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### Horsemen

Location: Unknown

*Four figures atop horseback stand tall, overlooking the land below that is peaking through the darkening clouds. A swirling deep red mass beneath them.*

*"It is time for us to ride and fulfill our own destinies," Death, the newest rider speaks from atop his pale green steed. The voice smooth and deadly, holding the attention of the fellow Horseman. "Can you feel that? Like a siren song running through our veins, calling us. It is the sixth seal opening, the tear in the dimensions is forming, and once it does, we must enter it."*

*Murmurs of agreement come from the other riders, all gripping their reigns tightly in anticipation. Staring at the distant earth below them, beneath the clouds now swirling into the eye of a large storm. The tunnel funnels down towards the ground as the fast moving wind turns the dark clouds, creating a blood red vortex.*

*The crack is loud, fast and clean like a whip. It shatters the hazy barrier between the two dimensions, giving freedom for the four Horseman to cross over the borderline. Gaining speed as they gallop towards the edge, the four riders let out war cries of excitement. Their horses dive without hesitation, full of adrenaline, as the group of figures plummet towards the earth. All free falling within the eye of the red hurricane.*

*Dry cracked dirt is soon met with the harsh pounding of hooves as the Horsemen meet the earth. The horses don't break stride as they land, and pick up pace as the four align themselves. The riders creating a wide line, like moving bullets, a heavy dust trail in their wake as they charge the wall of the hurricane. Disappearing into the fast-moving wind tunnel, they emerge out the other side. All four move as one, creating as much distance as possible between them and the destruction of mother nature's thumb behind them. The group only choosing to slow to a soft trot once they got far enough away.*

*"The last seal will be coming soon," the Black Rider is solemn. The sword at his side clinking loudly against his armour as his horse shifts him side to side. "We must all do what we are meant to, and find each other before the last trumpet sounds."*

*"Until then," the White Rider says. Securing the bow on their back tightly before pulling off sharply to the right, claiming the land of the west for himself.*

*"Until then," the others voice echo. Separating at once in their respected directions, they become like four strong arrows, each taking a quarter of the earth.*

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X: Ez

Location: Northern Claybelt Forest, Ontario, Canada.

It is so dark when I come to that I do not know how long it has been since I was knocked out. The edges and lines of the van come into focus as my eyes adjust to the lack of light. The sky visible outside of the van is black, starless, like a large metal dome had been dropped overtop of the horizon. No blood red sun, no moon, not a single star in the sky, not even a whisper of a wind. Silent. Lifeless. Like a slate wiped clean. I can only hear the light breathing of my two other occupants, no other sound of life breaking through the dark night.

The face of the clock on my wristwatch is hard to make out until my eyes adjust, but I can tell that it is a little after two o'clock. Now which two, a.m or p.m, I am not sure. It was a little after supper when I had blacked out. We could have been sitting here for a few hours or a full day, I have no way of knowing.

The vision is weighing heavy on me, the feeling of dread that accompanied the Horsemen's arrival has leaked into reality. They are here now. Somewhere. I can feel it.

An anxious feeling within me kicks into overdrive, my heart hammering in my chest as everything in me is telling me to move. Ignoring my two sleeping passengers, I pull myself forward, allowing my body to fall clumsily over into the front driver's seat. The front windshield has several cracks spidering out across its surface, the laminated glass having stopped it from shattering completely.

Thanking those above that the battery wasn't shorted by the shockwave, I attempt to roll up the front side windows, smiling as they panes come up out of the door unharmed. I figure it must have been Pan who was quick enough to hide them from the blast within the door's frames, smart thinking on her part. The pull demands me to head further away from the compound, away from ReeRee and everyone, but the reflection of the supplies in the rear-view mirror has me shifting the van into drive. Continuing on our path towards the Claybelt National Forest, while actively praying that it will still be worth it. Even if only one person is still there who needs it.

"Where are we?"

The question makes me jump, and the vehicle swerves hard across the rocky terrain before I am able to take control again. My hands straightening out the wheel while clutching my chest in a panic.

"Good gosh woman!" I shout. Regretting the moment that the words come out a bit too harsh. "I almost just rolled us. Don't do that!"

Pan repeats her question, ignoring my outburst as she slides forward into the front passenger seat. Her body thumping down loudly as she props her legs up on the dashboard.

"Almost at the river crossing I told you about, or what was the river anyway. The rivers and small run-offs that existed in this landscape are gone now, like they dried up. No longer being fed by the glaciers and rivers. Who knows what will happen if the poles melt completely..."

"Probably something even worse than what will happen to the oceans now that the moon is gone. Let's hope that it's just hidden, and not physically gone. Earth has never been without the moon's gravitational connection, and I don't want to find out what that would be like."

"Who knows, a flood in this burning land of fire may be a blessing in disguise." My statement ends in a mocking snort, the dreary image that our planet has become making me numb. A part of me wants to just give in to whatever is coming, to stop fighting, to stop trying so hard to make a future in this wasteland.

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Silence has fallen between us after a few hours of driving, the sparse road allowing my mind to drift freely as I allow myself to be overwhelmed with what I may find, once back to the only place I've called home for the last near decade.

"So, that was the second time that happened."

Her statement is light, but direct. Not a question, but one that carries the undertone of wanting an explanation. One I know I owe both of them, but the thought of telling them I am having dreams about giant knights on horseback and a lamb with a scroll, seems like a one-way ticket to being deemed out of my freaking mind.



"Yah, ... it was," I reply slowly. My eyes stay locked on the road in front of me, and I do my best to avoid the judging stare I can feel burning into the side of my face. "Look, I swear I will explain everything, okay? Let's get these supplies where we need to, and then we can sit down to discuss it all. There is so much you both don't know. Heck, even I'm still trying to piece it together and make sense of it all."

I can feel her studying me, reading to see if I am telling the truth. I don't blame her, for all they know I might be taking them straight into a trap right now.

"I'll be holding you to that," she concludes. Even though I can still hear the hint of doubt still left in her voice.

I snort, holding back a grin. "Oh, I'll tell you, "I say. "But it's up to you whether you even believe it or not."

The rest of our drive is full of empty riverbeds and the rocky bottoms of lakes that have always been covered. My heart aches, broken over the memories of what the safe haven I had created for my people is now. The nature that thrived alongside us is all gone, burnt and dried out, disappearing slowly as it took those, I watched over along with it. My hands have broken out into a sweat, the palms wet as I grip the wheel tightly with my fingers causing my knuckles to turn white. My heart is galloping at the thought of returning to an empty compound, and that everyone I saved is now gone. Gone with the last memory being that I was not there, that I never came back like I promised. What if they thought I left them?

When the end of the long logging road finally comes, it turns into an old turnaround that had been taken over by various weeds. The brown dead stems sticking up through the old gravel that had been poured along the roadway. I do my best to tuck the vehicle off to the side, and hope

that it won't be immediately obvious to those looking down towards the end of the long straight road.

Pan straightens from the ball she turned herself into, stretching her body out long before taking in the surroundings.

"So," she drags out. "Now what?"

"Now, we walk in and hopefully find some others to help unload the supplies," I answer, before turning off the engine and stuffing the keys into my pocket. "After we cover this van with whatever tarps we can find in the back. I mean, I doubt that there is anyone even remotely close to us right now, but I don't want to risk it."

"You got it," she says. Turning her head, she addresses the still sleeping man in the back. "Joh! Wake up Mr. Sandman, the rest of the trip is going to be on foot."

Her voice startles Joh out of his sleep, and he jerks up fast. Smacking his forehead loudly on the top of the van, he releases a loud hiss of pain and uses both hands to grasp the spot on his forehead as he glares at Pan.

"Wow gee, after such a wonderful wake up call, I can't wait to hike a few miles with my new concussion." He slides open the side door, and heaves himself out. Huffing in annoyance before closing it loudly behind him, Pan's snort of laughter following him out.

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## XI: Kol

Location: Labrador Sea, East Coast, Canada.

The large fishing boat rocks heavily side to side, the chains on the anchor pulling tight as it does its best to hold against the strong current brewing deep within the dark waters it floats on.

"We should get out of the Gulf as soon as possible Captain. You know as well as I do that changes like this to the current and water level can only mean one thing coming. And one of this size is going to be deadly, there is no question about it."

Nolen is my oldest crewmember. Some say that should mean the most loyal, but if any thing he challenges my authority more than Greer. A defiance that makes my blood boil even when I am in my best mood. The fact that he isn't wrong in his assumptions just pisses me off even more.

"Fascinating piece of unwanted information, Noley," I say. Choosing to keep my back facing him, my eyes trained on the moving water. "But you are right. The water is dropping because the tides are pulling out, the currents are changing because the moon no longer hovers over our heads. A tsunami is coming, building its speed somewhere out there over the next day. A wall of power bigger than history has ever seen. "

"And yet here you stand. A smile on your face as if watching dominoes, ones you have been so desperate to watch fall," Nolen replies. His voice is strong and steady, echoing over the noise of the moving water. "Why? Why are you so hell-bent on wanting to leave us to die in the barrel of such a wave? All of us who have stood by you?"

"Stood by me?" I yell. Anger finally getting the best of me as I spin around to face him head on. Taking long strides, I cross the top deck quickly, eating up the space between us. "You act like you are all so loyal, but I have heard the whispers. The crew is turning on me, stop pretending like it isn't happening."

His silence screams the truth I know is there. His head bowing as he quickly becomes unwilling to meet me eye.

"Exactly. And yet, everyone wants me to be so quick to tell you everything I know." I scoff. "I am the only one who *can* and *will* lead all of us to finding our paradise."

"Not if you kill us all when trying to succeed in whatever selfish mission it is that you have planned!" Nolen yells, his voice carrying. "I won't let you do it. If you think I won't tell everyone what you are doing, you are even crazier than I thought!" He turns to move back inside, and head down to the dining area where everyone is gathered.

I act before I think. Impulsiveness. A terrible habit that I am still in the process of breaking, one that has cost me many lost friendships and relationships, with those who just couldn't seem to understand that I am a fun guy until you make the mistake of pushing me too far. When trying to tell me what to do with my life, with my greater plan.

His body surprises me with its weakness to fend off my attack. An aspect that momentarily relieves some of the guilt I feel as his eyes beg for me to release my grip on his throat. He wouldn't make it much longer anyway, his aged body can no longer allow him the best chance at fulfilling his purpose, and leaving him behind at the next supply run would just be cruel.

*This is a mercy killing, I tell myself. And one needed to protect my stance as Captain. Two birds, one stone.*

Our scuffle is quick. My strength is no match for him, and his body soon goes limp from lack of air. The cracking of his neck is easy, his weight falling into me as I aim to keep his body upright. Moving swiftly, I flip his form over the side of the ship as quietly as possible, the body

disappearing into the moving water. The loud splash of its entry being swallowed up by the sounds the angry ocean is already making.

Looking around, I remember how public our conversation may have been, but I can see only one of the lower crew members across the deck using his wide broom to clean off the back of the trawler. A useless task now that the oceans weren't allowing our giant nets to catch much of anything without having to travel for several hours out into the deeper waters.

"Witness anything interesting tonight," I ask him. Challenging. Waiting to see how he is going to handle the situation.

"Not a damn thing, Captain," he says. He meets my gaze for only a moment before continuing his sweeping.

"Good. And keep quiet about the changing currents until morning. I don't want any panic. It's about time the crew gets those answers they've all been wanting."

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## XII:Pan

Location: Northern Claybelt Forest, Ontario, Canada

"My feet are killing me."

"Joh, how about this, I'll be the one to kill you if you don't pick up the pace," I shout back at him. "All of us are tired."

"Well then why don't we stop for a minute? We've been walking for a few hours now and I swear I've seen that same tree three times."

A laugh bursts from my chest as I turn around to meet his smirking face a few feet behind me.

"Come on you two," he barters. "I only want a quick five – to thirty – minute break, max."

"Thirty minutes? We still have at least another two hours of walking at this rate, as is!" Ez bursts out. Spinning around quickly from his place in front, he takes long strides back towards us. "I really don't think you are taking into account the seriousness—"

"—*of this situation*," mocks Joh in a pitchy voice, waving him off. "You keep acting like we have no idea about anything. You do know we were doing fine before we met you right?!"

"What are you talking about? I found both of you tied up in the back of a truck!"

"Irrelevant details," Joh interrupts, hand waving him away as he laughs at the incredulous look on Ez's face.

I know he is doing all of this just to get a reaction out of Ez, Joh having been poking his nerves for the last hour. Most people who didn't know Joh like I did would think he is doing it only out of boredom, but I know better. He never has been good at dealing with tense situations, doing his best to lighten the mood whenever he can. His father disappearing was the first time I had seen him lose that aspect, his body completely shut down. He stopped talking and joking around for a while, but he also never cried, at least in front of me. The only evidence he ever felt anything when all that happened was his tear-stained face the day that we found him.

Over the years I tried talking to him, tried to bring up what happened or how he felt with everything going on around us, but he never seemed to want to discuss it. Always found a way to

crack a joke, as a way to shrug off whatever I was trying to ask him. The fact that the last few days have been the toughest for us in a long time is clearly taking its toll, and his way of processing appears to have prodded out an ugly sarcasm that is really sawing at my last nerve.

"Enough," I say from my stance in between, following their ping-pong argument being enough to give me a headache. "Ez, it'll be a quick break I promise. Besides, we haven't eaten since we all came to from the last quake. It's a good spot to start a fire and cook a little something before moving on."

Joh releases a shout of victory before beginning to collect stones and fallen sticks from the surrounding area, the dry dead landscape leaving us lots of firewood.

"Fine. We sit, we eat quickly, and we get moving. I want to reach our next destination before we need to rest again," Ez says, sliding the pack off his shoulders and settling himself comfortably onto the layers of underbrush.

"You know," I start, eyeing Joh quickly before resting my gaze heavily on Ez. "Now would be a great time to tell us all about these fancy dreams you're having?"

I can tell that Joh has slowed his progress on the firepit, choosing to focus his ears on whether or not Ez is going to finally open up.

"No," he answers shortly. "Not until we get back to everyone, to ReeRee, she's a witness to other moments that I was pulled into a vision – which is what I've been calling them by the way. Visions. Not dreams, not nightmares. They are too real. I can feel it, the realness. The truth. Hear a voice that I know is coming from somewhere..."

He trails off, eyes focused on his hands as he twists his fingers around. The skin turning red from the strain he is putting on the joints.

"Okay, Ez," I say, laying my hand lightly on his to stop the movements. His hands twitch away from my touch in surprise as he hides them in the sleeves of his dark hoodie. "We can talk about it after. Way after if you want. No pressure."

"Whoa, hang on," Joh cuts in, with a new edge to his voice. "Yes pressure, tons of it actually. You can't just keep it to yourself, we are all in this together now. And you think that—"

"Joh," I reprimand, glaring. "Enough. We will find out when he is ready to tell us. What is going on with you? You've been touchy since we woke up."

"Nothing," he glowers at me. Quickly slipping his hand in his pocket to clench whatever is inside tightly as if in reassurance, before continuing. "I'm just sick of having no idea what is happening, or why out of everyone on this damn planet, we are some of the ones still stuck here when everything goes to shit!"

"I know, okay! I know," I shout back. My voice laced with a defeat I wish I could hide.

Our campsite is silent now. All of us mute to the truth we are feeling. The emotions we all hide working to paralyze us in this moment. The only sounds being the striking of the match as Joh sets the wood aflame, our faces now lit up in the orange glow of the fire.

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My eyes spring open the moment I hear the crunching of several pairs of feet. The sounds coming off loud in the quiet surroundings. We had fallen asleep I realize, as I notice that our fire has turned into a smouldering pit of coals. The black smoke funneling up into the sky above.



It takes me a moment to comprehend that Ez and Joh are still asleep near me. Their snores light, both with heads dropping down and chins on chest. My brows furrow, confusion filling me as I remember the sounds that had woken me up.

"Well, well," a voice says from behind, startling me as I whip around while pulling myself quickly into a standing position. "Good Morning Sleeping Beauty, aren't you a little gift just to happen upon out here."

Four Glories are positioned behind me. The one who spoke takes a clear leadership position, choosing to advance a few feet towards me as his eyes rake my body slowly from head to toe. Several more of them congregated near their line of trucks, parked a few hundred meters back. They must have seen the smoke from our fire and decided to sneak up on us.

Doing my best not to reveal the fear trying to paralyze my body, I force my face into a calm expression and drain the tension from my tightly clasped arms.

"Morning everyone, kind of you to stop by," I say, flashing a bright smile. "Wish you would have given us some notice, we could have had breakfast ready."

"Nah, no worries at all," one chuckles darkly. His eyes hidden by the brim of his lowly pulled ballcap. "We're here to invite you to our new—"

"We'll pass." Joh's voice startles me, coming from right behind my shoulder. His tone stern and steady, eyes piercing into the man who spoke.

"Thanks, but no thanks and all that," Ez adds from my right. Moving forward to stand beside me.

The Glorie who had taken the lead initially is sending daggers at me with his eyes, but I meet them head on. Staring deeply into his as I smirk, waiting for them to make the next move and step it up to the confrontation we all know they really want.

"The invite is not optional" he snaps. "You're coming with us. Easy way or hard way. It's happening." He moves forward, choosing to challenge Joh first. Assuming that because of my best friend's height in comparison to us that he is the main threat.

Big mistake on their part.

"Guess that means we choose hard way," I say. Purposefully drawing the attention of the Glorie, I make sure to wait until his eyes lock with mine before I take my moment. Swinging my arm with the hand clenching one of the firepit stones, I bring it down fast and hard across the side of his temple.

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### XIII: Ameira

Location: Northern Claybelt Forest, Ontario, Canada

"Ameira, left or right?" Mahd asks sharply, pulling me away from the tiny lines I have been tracing for the last several hours. "The tracks fork here off the main road, it could be either or."

The backroads leading out to the Claybelt Forest Complex area are rough and cracked deep with rivets from old logging trucks. The hazardous terrain causing a big risk to us getting stuck in the middle of nowhere. It was not until we notice sets of fresher tracks through the dirt

that we were able to pick up a real trail to follow, crossing my fingers for the last mile that we were not following some tire tracks only preserved from the lack of wind.

"Uhm," I hesitate. "These roads must be new add-ons. The map doesn't show anything except this road continuing on for at least the next mile, before hitting what looks to be a dead end."

My fingers trace the thin white line on the map. According to this, we are on one of the old roads leading deep in towards the marked Claybelt area. The pictured lakes are gone now though, only large craters show their existence; however, the twists and turns that match the map in my hand, reassure me that we are going in the right direction.

"Right well, the tracks don't lead any further down this road. They split, so we need to make a decision either way," Mahd explains. Biting his lip in anxious thought as he scans the tracks in the road. "I don't think it matters at this point, if one doesn't work out we know to circle back. We can't leave without finding them. Not after all this."

Mahd sighs deeply, his fingers massaging his temples as he closes his eyes.

"Okay," he says after a moment of searching in his pocket. Looking at me as he opens his palm to show a coin. "Heads we go left, tails we go right." He flips it at the last word, the coin turning in the air several times before he catches it. Smacking it down on the back of his hand, he reveals its face in one swift motion.

"Left it is," I say decidedly. The truck pulling onto the new road, bumping sluggishly over the rivets.

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Over an hour of driving the side road and there is still nothing other than the dry barren landscape around us. Large rock cuts and valleys surround us, our truck chugging the best it can through the deep tracks. Mahd doing everything possible to avoid anything that may pop one of our tires.

"Do you think they are okay?" I ask, sick of the dead silence.

"Who?" Mahd counters. His eyes focused intently on the road in front of us.

"The people we left behind," I say. A sad tone seeping its way into my voice. "We worked for so long to gather everyone, to help those who were desperate. Do you think they were able to keep everything running okay? Before leaving I had written down every thing I could think of that the other's may have needed to know. All the keys were left on the desk in the main office..."

I trail off, swallowing down tears that threatened to fall.

"They have everything they needed, I am sure once they figured out that we had to leave, they would have just kept things moving along as they normally do. We were just the ones to help bring everyone together Ameira, it was them who helped us build our community into a place that could actually be something. Can you imagine us trying to figure out that water filtration on our own? Or if it was me in charge of the indoor vegetable gardens? We wouldn't have lasted more than a month."

I laugh hard at the thought, the image he painted helping to relieve some of the guilt I have felt since leaving our community behind. He is right. We may have been the ones able to find those who needed to be found, but it was those we saved that made everything we had possible. As long as the world didn't continue to crumble too much, they all should be fine. The

community was built well enough to run almost self-sufficiently. I just prayed that by the time we could get back to them, there would still be people existing there.

"So, how long exactly are we going to keep driving this before we turn around and try option B?" I ask, choosing to change the topic. My anxiousness growing the longer we drove without seeing any sign that this may be the right way. "I'm just saying, our gas tank level is dropping as we go and I don't want to risk the chance of not making it back to the main road."

"Yea, I know ... And as much as I would like to take this all the way to the end, just to make sure," Mahd begins, pausing to slow down to a stop and shifting into park. "We should probably turn around and hope we find better luck taking the other way."

"Agreed. If all else fails, the best backup plan will be to head back into Timmins—hope that it isn't the death trap we assumed it would be when doing our best to avoid it— and see if we can find a radio somewhere that will let me try to contact someone."

Laughing in response to his plan, I grab the map once more. Readjusting back into my seat, readying myself for a light nap as we drove back out to the main road. Relishing in the idea of not having to be his GPS for the next little while.

"Ameira."

"Yes, that's me," I joke. Too focused on balling his sweater up into a pillow against the door to glance up.

"Someone's in the road."

His voice is calm, but the moment he speaks my blood ices over. A wave of cold panic flooding throughout, and a sheen of sweat instantly breaks out on my back. My neck seems to

paralyze itself, frozen as I stare at Mahd and his eyes locked on the road ahead of him. His hands gripping the steering wheel.

I forcibly turn my head forward, eyes immediately connecting with a figure positioned in the middle on the road several feet down. The details of them hidden by the shadows created by the darkened sky above us, and the headlights failed to illuminate anything farther than a few feet ahead. The air is thick and hazy still, working to tinge the landscape red.

"What do we do?" I whisper, terrified that the person can somehow hear me.

"Reverse. Reverse. Reverse" Mahd chants quickly. My hand knocks into his as we both reach out in a panic to shift us out of park. I do my best to check the road using the mirrors, knowing we may have to take off out of here backwards to avoid the chance of getting stuck while turning around. My heart sinks at what I can see.

"That's not going to work. Check the mirrors, there are three more behind us," I mutter. Gulping down the urge to throw up as I lean over, locking all the doors and making sure the windows are up.

I can feel my heartbeat in my ears as I watch the three figures from behind begin to close in on our truck. Mahd's hand finds the handle of the hatchet that was stored in the side of the driver's door when we found it, one of many weapons spaced out within the vehicle. Clearly whoever owned it previously, was not afraid of a little—or a lot—of violence. But we were. Violence, murder, harming others, is something that we never had tolerance for when rebuilding our community. In the seven years of us all coming together and being led by him, Mahd always made sure to avoid it. The fact that his fingers now played with the handle revealed just how worried he really is.

"Easy you, stay calm," I say. I force myself to take several deep breaths, while keeping an eye on the man approaching Mahd's window. "Who knows, maybe these are the people we are looking for?"

Both men are wearing similar outfits, dark blue hats pulled down tight on their heads. Mahd moves to roll down his window before they demand it, but still only allows the space to open a few inches.

"Evening Gentlemen," he begins, placing a large smile on his face. "Am I ever glad to see you, we have been driving down this road for what seems like forever, looking for what we heard is a new age sort of encampment – one taking in people such as ourselves?"

My eyes widen at his response, the idea of him being so blunt about what we were doing had caught me off guard. I wasn't sure if we will regret being so open, but I guess he figured that there is no way that these individuals are this far into the forest, and not connected in some way to the camp we know is out here. That, or they're robbers who have no idea what we are talking about, and we are now moments from death.

I studied the man's eyes intently as Mahd spoke, checking to see for any spark of recognition.

"An encampment you say," the man smiles. "You hear that, Chauncey?"

Chauncey grins as he pulls up beside him, having moved over to the other side to be with his friend once he figured out that I wasn't going to open my window.

"I did, I did," he says, following it with a loud barking laugh. "Yea, it's not far from here at all actually. We were just on our way back when we seen you squatting in the middle of the road. Isn't that right Roger?"

His question comes off weirdly mocking, Roger matching it with a sly smile as he replies.

"Mmm, yes, we were. Headed straight back there actually."

I can't tell if this is just their offside nature, or if they are hiding something ominous, but after everything we have been through, I knew we have to try follow this lead.

"Well, isn't that just wonderful!" My voice is tight as I lean over Mahd to speak, but I hope that my smile still looks genuine. "I assume you wouldn't mind us tagging along then? We can follow up behind you."

The two exchange glances before signalling to those that are still surrounding the truck to go back for their jeeps parked down the road behind us.

"Yes," replies Roger after a moment. His cold eyes meeting mine. "I suppose we can do that. Interesting though, isn't it? How easily you seemed to find us, all the way back here?"

I glance at Mahd, silently asking if he thinks it best to tell him. His eyes meeting mine as he gives a small shrug, confirming that he is just as unsure as I am.

"I spoke to two people there actually, over a radio. A few weeks ago. I was meant to meet them in this area, but the quake cut us off before that could happen," Mahd explains. "So, we packed up and headed out in hopes of using the directions I had to find them. And here we are."

"How convenient us finding you is then!" Chauncey says, a cheshire grin on his face.



"You bet it was! I can't wait to get there and meet them. Any chance ReeRee is nearby today?" I immediately know that his question is meant as a small test, feeling out the waters for what I hope is just paranoia.

"Oh yah, sure. ReeRee is always around," Roger shrugs, waving off my question. "We will go find him as soon as we get there. I am sure he will be amazed that you made it so far."

He walks off with Chauncey before I can reply. Ice filling my veins as I watch them retreat back to the army jeep, the sides spray painted with a bright logo I can't make out.

"ReeRee wasn't the man you talked to, was it?" I ask, my eyes following the figures back to their vehicles.

"No," Mahd replies heavily, starting the truck and getting ready to follow those passing by. "She wasn't."

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#### XIV: Horsemen

##### Location: North America Continent

*The call of the trumpets is coming, and the time of the horseman is running out. Each of the riders have covered miles across the earth, working to divide themselves across continents and seek out the souls who still walked this planet. Those who are still awaiting the final weigh-ins on their soul.*

*Judgment is now falling across the entirety of the North American Continent.*

*The horse carrying the black rider runs at speeds that no other living being could, its massive hooves thundering across the landscape.*

*The rider cleansing cities and communities housing the individuals who are still hiding out on this dying earth. The people that didn't repair their souls in time, the souls who spent the years of reckoning doing sinful acts and choosing to ignore the warnings given by many who visited this dimension throughout history.*

*A new calling replaces the old one after each task of the horseman is complete, like the tug of a new fishing line drawing them where they need to be. His inner compass drives him towards his targets, his movement quick. The travels of the Horseman starting in the west, as he dominated over the Rockies and down throughout the prairie plains as his trajectory eastward through the country. Taking out the smaller gatherings of people as he went, even those hiding in the most remote parts of the mountains.*

*The horse breathes heavy as its hooves trample the dry earth. Eyeless sockets catching shadows and making them appear as dark pits. Its skin tight over its face, enhancing the skeletal-like appearance, further promising the death that its rider brings.*

*The reigns are held tight in the horseman's hands, his body in tune with the rhythm of his horse. Acting as one beast, one mind. One goal. The flickering images of the destination filter sporadically over his vision as they ride: the now barren forest the encampment is surrounded by, the figures living within that claim a righteousness they do not own.*

*One of the largest gatherings of souls left that need to be cleansed from this earth, and sent away with the rest found to be unredeemable.*

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XV: Ez

Location: Northern Claybelt Forest Complex

Two days.

It has been two days since the Glories found us at our campfire. Two days since the scary fight between all of us that ended up with Joh stabbed in the side, and Pan and I being forced to surrender. Two days since we were thrown into the makeshift jail in what use to be my own encampment. And two days since we have seen Joh alive.

My encampment is now a foreign territory, having fallen victim to the invasion of the Glories and their supposed righteous leader. To give her credit, Pan had taken out two other Glories before the rest were able to charge our make-shift camp from their spot at the trucks, a wave of tackling arms and shouts overtaking us before we knew it. Pan was holding her own, so was I, doing our best to stop them from getting a good grip on us. That is until one of the first few men Pan took out was able to get back on their feet, the long glinting hunting knife stored in his boot drawn and swung towards Pan's exposed back as she fought off the others. Unaware of the attacker coming up from behind her, she fought to not be overtaken by the other Glories, her punches landing hard and fast. Kicking whenever she could, trying to put more distance between herself and those around her.

Joh and I noticed at the same time. Our eyes widening, as we took in the actions of the man coming at Pan as if in slow motion. A look of glee on the Glorie's face like he knew he had her. Both of us moved, but Joh was closer. Diving between the Glorie and his victim, using his body weight to drag the man down with him. The two locked in a struggle on the ground, fighting for the upper-hand.

Frozen in shock at choosing who to help, I stood witness to the horror that my hesitations cost us. Cost Joh.

The Glories arm jabbed forward quickly. Joh had attempted to dodge it but wasn't fast enough. The tip of the blade sliding a couple inches into Joh's side, just below his rib cage. His hands slowing from fending off the Glorie, before coming up to grasp his side tightly. Eyes wide, chest heaving. The Glorie slowly moved off of him, breathing heavy as he leant back and crouched on his heels, knife hanging in his hand loosely.

Pan was screaming at that point, tugging as hard as she could against the two sets of arms that held her. Her face horrified at the deep red covering Joh's hands as he stared at his side in shock. His form still sprawled on the ground.

"Dammit Chauncey, how many times do we need to tell you to stop making things messy?" One of the guards had said, his voice laced with a sick humour.

"Aw, come on. You know me, I've got slippery fingers," Chauncey laughed. The Chesire smile he flashed as he watched the others secure Pan and I in bindings had shivers creeping coldly down my spine. He wasn't sorry about what he did, if anything it seemed like he was picking out how to do it again. His eyes devoured Pan as he stared at her from across the smoking fire pit, his hand slowly twisting the bloody blade in the pocket of his worn cargo shorts. Playing with it, like a cat pruning its claws as it stares at the mouse it caught. Promising things I never wanted to find out.

They had made sure to knock us out before throwing us into the back of their trucks, Joh being dragged into the backseat of one of the jeeps moments before everything went black. His head dangled limply between the two who carried him, drifting in and out of consciousness. It

was the last time we had seen him, our only hope being that they had relented to our screaming pleas to help him. To keep him alive.

"I think you're forgetting something."

My sigh is loud with its annoyance, having given up pleasantries hours ago when dealing with Pan's constant stream of questions.

"I've said it seventeen times already Pan. Seventeen. Literally, I've counted," I say. My fingers grasp my temples tightly as I massage them. "We are standing in what is essentially a giant metal box, with one big door, and something that I barely call a bed. There is nothing hiding in here that could be useful!"

The hurt that crosses her face tells me I went too far, and regret bubbles up like heartburn. She has been forcing us to wrack our brains for ideas since we woke up in here and discovered that Joh wasn't with us. The guards that answered our incessant banging after a few hours refused to tell us anything about him, and the stress is obviously taking a toll on her, on both of us.

"I'm sorry Pan, I didn't mean to snap that hard, but there really isn't much to work with in here. I have told you everything I can about the layout of the encampment as I remember it; however, all of that is useless as long as we are stuck in here. It's a half-converted shipping container, there is only what you see here, that's it."

"I know, but I just can't sit here any more. I can't keep losing people, you don't understand. He's all I got. Everyone else is gone, and I—"

Her voice cuts off, a loud gulp swallowing down the rest of her rant as she finally gives into our reality. Her back sliding down the cool metal wall of the container as she drops her head to rest on her knees in defeat. Forced to do nothing, but wait and see what those who hold us captive will do.

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Screeching from the lock on the container door has us both scrambling to our feet several hours later. Several muffled voices can be heard from behind the walls of our given prison, but it is impossible to make out what it is they are saying.

The doors open quick, and the change of light forces us to squint to see the details of the figures coming inside the container. Three Glories drag in two other people, a couple who can't be much older than me. Both sporting various forming bruises and the man's lip had been split, his chin still covered in dried blood.

"So, this is your new humble abode, as you can see it's mostly private, only two roommates, but the rent is cheap," the Glorie cackles. Both of his hands are wrapped tightly around the arms of the woman, his two other guards keeping a hold on her partner.

His face is immediately familiar once I can see it, although the weasel-like laugh that he let out would have been enough to i.d. him anyway. Chauncey. The same man that stabbed Joh and laughed, the same man who casually wiped our friend's blood off his knife on the side of his pants. The dark stain visible, taunting us with the fact we still don't know if Joh is even alive.

"I think you'll enjoy it," he continues, a sick grin on his face. His two friends laughing along at his antics. "But you know, offer still stands to share my bunk." He leans forward, sticking his nose into the crook of his captive's neck, breathing deeply into the fabric of her hijab.

"Hey! Get your disgusting—"

It's the first the male captive spoke since entering. His voice deep and rough, but filled with a fear for her. Clear by the immediate struggle against those holding him.

His reaction gives her the distraction she appeared to be looking for. Her movement is fast, and while Chauncey's hold is strong, she uses the closeness to her advantage. Shrugging him off as she slams her head backwards in a well-placed jerk, connecting with a solid smack to Chauncey's face. His cry of pain informing us that her hit got him good, and his hand instantly comes up to cradle his nose. He shoves her hard towards us, her body landing heavy in my arms as she stumbles on the metal floor. Hands still tied in front of her.

"You'll pay for that," Chauncey promises with a dark look in his eye.

"Don't touch me," she says. "Ever." Having recovered herself, she stands tall and challenges him with her eyes. "Now let my husband go, you have no reason to keep us here."

"Oh, we'll let him go, don't worry you can have him," he replies. Motioning towards his friends as they shove him roughly to the ground. His wife moves quickly to his side to help with his bindings like I did with hers. "But you two aren't leaving, we've got big plans coming for all of you. "

He scans all our faces slowly before focusing in on the one glaring at him from beside me. Pan moved up once she saw that it was the man who hurt Joh. Her face now holding a raw fury that has worry sprouting within me and I silently plead with her to not do anything stupid. To not risk getting killed before we even have a chance of finding Joh and taking back control of my home.

"Big plans," Chauncy reiterates. A smile now on his face as he speaks to Pan. "Especially for you. You've got my name written all over you."

"I belong to no one."

Pan's voice is hard, and I can tell that she has also figured out that Chauncey has taken a strong interest in her. One that makes my skin crawl, and anger begin to seep through my veins.

"Guess we'll have to wait and see about that then, huh?" He says, before turning towards his friends. "Shame though isn't it, Roger? How rude she's being towards me, and after I came here with the intention of taking her to see her beloved best friend."

"He's alive?" I gasp. Filling with relief and doubt at the same time. "How do we know you aren't lying? I don't believe it. Pan, you are *not* going anywhere with him. He knows what to say."

"What if he isn't lying?" She asks after a pause. Staring intensely at Chauncey, trying to read his truth before addressing him. "Fine. Then take me. Show me that Joh is safe"

"And?" Chauncey questions as Roger lets out a loud laugh.

"And what?"

"And, what will you do once he does that?" Roger cuts in, a sly look in his eye. "You gunna be nice to him? Maybe take a little walk, give him some thanks."

The two men burst out in loud laughter as the third Glorie looks on. An uncomfortable look on his face.

"Pan," I try again. "Listen to me, don't do it. Don't go with them alone."



Pan is quiet now, chewing her lip while deep in thought. Gaze jumping between the two men promising to take her to Joh, as she is clearly torn on what to do and who to trust.

"The man you want to see, is he younger like you?" The woman asks. "I don't know if these men will keep their promise to bring you, but I may be able to confirm that he is alive. We seen someone else under watch when we were brought through, in one of the med tents. We could hear them arguing as we walked by and the flap was pulled open. Brown hair. Loud. Extremely sarcastic?"

"Couldn't be anyone else with that description," Pan replies. A smile now placed on her face knowing that he is alive. "I knew it."

I can see the decision on her face before she says it. The determination, knowing that there is nothing that I can say right now to change her mind.

"Okay," she concedes. "I'll go with you, to see Joh. Consider the path there our walk."

"You got it," Chauncey smiles. The fake softness of it ending at his eyes, two pits of cold focused with unblinking attention. "Ladies first."

My heartbeat is in my ears now, breath short as I watch Pan move from my side. Walking towards the entrance of the container as the men file out behind her before the doors slam shut. The lock sliding into place.

All of me praying that I didn't see Pan for the last time, and that I didn't just let down Joh.

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XVI: Kol

Location: Coal Harbour, Hudson Bay, Ontario

The books on my desk draws me back into the memories of when I got them. The year or so I spent over in Europe, having traveled over there to work on building better trade connections, had been filled with days searching through dusty old toms in darkened library corridors. It had been a few months of useless help coming from the few crew members I trusted enough to help me before I found her. Mai.

She was looking for the same thing that I was. A woman that appeared to have figured out just as much –if not more, at that time—than I had about everything going on, which I had found extremely unsettling. The soul in her eyes being one that pierced into me the first time we crossed paths in the archives, like she seen me for what I really was behind all the charm I used on the staff to get access. Her dislike for me became immediately obvious when she reluctantly agreed to help us in exchange for a ride back over to North America.

*"So, you're in, then?" I said, smirking at the woman in front of me. Her arms crossed tightly across her front, leg popped out as she tapped her foot impatiently.*

*"If by in you mean, am I in agreeance to bring you along with me to a few of my leads, and in turn you promise to take me back to Canada, then yes. I'm in," she replied. "But if you meant that this means I am somehow joining your little clan, then absolutely not. Think of this more as a contracted collaboration, that's it."*

*"Whatever title you need to put on it to make this happen is fine by me," I had laughed.*

The first few meet-ups had gone fine, Mai connecting with some old contacts of her parents that were still around. People who could get us passed the locked doors and sealed cases to access the old scriptures we needed. However, it was the times that we found dead-ends the most frustrating, the contacts simply refusing to give over even a little bit of the information that we needed. As if any of the secrecy even mattered anymore. My blood boils even remembering the anger I would feel having to walk out of the archives, like weak scolded dogs refused what we worked hard to find. Mai always threatening to stop helping us anytime I attempted to force it out of the contacts, and if it wasn't for everything that she had helped me find, I would have gotten rid of her. Her threats had worked for a few months, our travels leading us through several countries, until one day they didn't.

The annoyance of those withholding information getting to me to the point that I had snapped. The screams of the security guard echo through the memory of what we did to him and a few of the others that day in our pursuit for me to get the final texts I needed. Mai having walked in early from a task I had sent her off on, a ruse to give us a few moments alone to convince them to hand over what we needed. Her face horrified as she ran into the room, yelling obscenities at us as she tugged desperately on my arm to tell them to stop.

*"Please, this isn't the way to do this. We can find it some where else, finding out the truth at the price of all this bloodshed will never be worth it!"*

*"All they had to do was hand over the keys to the restricted section Mai, all this could have been avoided," I replied, before taking the keys one my crewmembers held out to me. The security guard bloody and unconscious as his feet.*

*"You're sick," Mai said. Her eyes brimmed with tears, a disgusted look planted on her face.*

*"And you're done with your half of the agreement. Out of contacts means we are done. It's time to sail out, you can either take the ticket back to North America or stay here. Either way, the texts are coming with me."*

She knew she didn't have a choice. Setting sail with us the next morning, her eyes only silently asking me where the others who did the text hunting with us were. Smart on her end. I didn't need any attention drawing to the fact that the few members of the crew, that I had been taking with me, didn't return the night before that. The briefing I had given at breakfast detailed their absence as a choice, that they had decided to leave on their own. A quick, but understandable choice, I had told them. The truth was, the men I had been bringing with me were starting to get too curious, asking too many questions about the things we were searching for. Some of them had started reading the texts and were making connections on their own. I couldn't have them figuring out my plans too soon. Not until the right moment, when they would have no choice but to trust me. The last loose string to get rid of was Mai, and that was surprisingly easier than expected.

*"Where are we?" Mai asks, her eyes squinting into the smoky haze of the silenced town. The docks we pulled up to lining the front coastal road, many of the front shops burnt to the ground.*

*"We're at your stop!" I say boastfully, hand on her back as I urge her to walk further off the boat. "You wanted a ride back, and we delivered. "*

*"I said I wanted a ride back to Canadian east coast. Look at this place, the entire landscape is burnt to the ground. There's nothing left, you can't leave me here," she exclaimed as she tried to get back onto the boat, but I stayed where I was. Holding the railing and blocking her way.*

*"Jersey is the east coast, and it's close enough. Tomato, tomato, and all that," I say. "Besides, this will be good for you. You can use some time to thicken up your skin, being too nice will never get you what you want."*

To give her credit she didn't cry, never begged for us to stay or come back as we pulled away from the docks. She only stared at me, eyes burning across the distance as we got further from the mainland; her small form turning to begin striding up the dock into the town after a few moments. If I had only known then, who she really is, I would have never let her disappear.

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I had to come up with something at the gathering I know is coming this morning. The morning after Nolen threatened me. When I was forced to do what I had to. The crew wanted answers and not just about their missing member, but about what we are going to do next. So, I had sailed the rest of the night. The boat's engine strains against the pull of the new strong current, the water level continuing its slow descent the longer the hours went on. I knew that I was doing the exact opposite thing that sailors are told to, heading in towards a port instead of driving as far and fast as I could out to open water. In hopes of getting past the tsunami, before it becomes the impenetrable wall that the sea is telling me it will; but it is because of everything that I have learned, and what the legends explained to me of what has to happen, that I am doing what I am.

The boat is just beginning to pull into the open bay near the docks at Coal Harbour on Southampton Island, the land mass sitting near the opening of the waters of Hudson Bay. The water level had dropped so low that aligning our side up with the docks meant for the bigger ships is now impossible, the weathered wood of the long tall legs holding it up already visible. Boats still tied near the marina rested heavy on their hulls, the water too low to float. We will need to drop the anchor as close as we can and head in to shore using emergency rafts, otherwise my hull will drag bottom like the rest, but that isn't what's important. What's important is the fact that the place looked untouched, at least from the view I can see using the binoculars. The boat landing is small, not housing a lot of people. So, the chances of the population being wiped out quick during the initial cleanses is high, and the boats appear to have been left untouched for a while. White torn sails hang from their masts. The island seeming to have avoided the looting seen every where else.

The crew's voices echo up from below, the chattering getting louder as they leave breakfast to come up to the top deck. I had spoken with them only briefly last night, when ordering them all into their cabins, stating that tomorrow morning would finally be the day we made some big moves. Ordering only Greer to stay up, I had him help me captain the boat back in through the passage between the east coast provinces, allowing him to stumble off to bed once we had tossed the anchor down. He helped with being my eyes in the dimly lit night that seemed to be our permanent sky since the last cleanse, an endless black dome dropped over the earth. Blocking out anything above, even where the moon was meant to be.

"Good morning gentlemen!" I greet. My arms spreading wide as I turn to face the crew gathering behind me. "Slept well, I hope? Breakfast good?"

A chorus of murmurs in agreeance reply to my question. The general vibe of the crew seems to be better than it has been in a while, the aspect of waking up with land so close in sight setting the tone.

"As you can see, Greer and I had taken the liberty of commandeering the ship for all of us. Figuring it would be nice to wake up to the promise of supplies within actual view, seeing as so many of you have come to doubt my promises."

My voice had started off as light, drawing them in, before hardening into a reminder I know they needed. To be reminded that I know more than what they think I do, hear more than they want me to. Above all, I need them to know that my words were never false, that I am the one to lead them through this landscape, this destiny. Their demeanours change instantly, many shifting awkwardly as they looked at their feet and others meeting me gaze with an apologetic eye. There are a few who still made sure to hold their resilience within their eyes, as if challenging me. Which is fine. After today, having to load whatever supplies we can, it will probably be best to lose some of the dead weight we have been carrying. Such as those weighed down with doubts about their captain.

"Now, on to the real reason I have you gathered. Something more important than the supplies," I begin. "I am sure that many of you can feel the changes in the ocean, see the level dropping outside your port windows, and you are right. The waters are changing, in a big way. The earthquakes over the last several weeks have not just impacted the land, but the seas as well. And with the falling level of the water began mere hours after the last cleanse, the drawing of the current outwards, it can all only signal one thing. Something we can not outrun, but only prepare to ride out."

The crew is silent, waiting for me to continue. A tension forming throughout the crowd, and I intentionally hold it longer. Reveling in the power that I know I hold over everyone.

"A Tsunami is forming out there somewhere," I say, gesturing towards the open water. "Probably several, with some hitting all of the world's coasts, but definitely a big one headed this way, especially with the changes I have witnessed over the last several hours on the ship's radar."

"So, you mean a wave is coming? Like a giant tidal wave? That's what all this drama is about?"

The voice comes from one of the crewmen who met my eye with challenge earlier, his tone mocking as those around him smirked at his comment.

"Yes, a wave, but not just one wave, several of them. Something called a wave train. And it isn't a tidal, it's a wall. One that has been known to rise to over a 100 feet and travel at 500 miles an hour, crossing immense distances before crashing itself into land. And that was *before* everything went to shit, before the environment changed the way it has. An ocean change like this has never been recorded before, so what do you think the tsunami will mutate into this time?"

Their cries of anger almost overpower the end of my sentence. A reaction I figured would be coming after I have kept everything a secret for so long. Many of these men have been on fishing trawlers as long as I have, and knew what a tsunami meant for those in ships too close to shore.

"I can understand your frustrations," I say. Doing my best to calm down my crew, and regain back control of the situation. "But trust me when I say that coming in here to the bay is going to be our best bet. The radar is shot, whatever is happening out there in the oceans is



making it pretty much unreadable. At least if we are here, we can take up some kind of defense, lots of land surrounds us for the most part. Plus, this place has some access to supplies that we will need if we survive this thing...I know that you all aren't happy with me, but as of right now, I'm the best shot you have at making it through what's coming."

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## XVII: Ameira

Location: Claybelt Encampment, Ontario, Canada

"She shouldn't have gone. It's dangerous out there."

"Yea well, it didn't use to be," says the man, still staring blankly at the closed container door. "At least not when it was mine."

"Yours?"

"All of it, the encampment. The gardens, the safety. My doing, my years of work collecting everyone I could into my safe haven... mine and ReeRee's."

His voice cracks at the mention of his friend, face falling. Making it obvious that something must've happened to her.

"I'm Ameira," I say. Hoping to break the awkwardness of being strangers, all of us stuck in the same predicament. "This is Mahd, my husband."

"Ez"

"Nice to mee—"

"Ez? As in Ezra?" Mahd interrupts, his eyes wide as the other man nods slowly in confusion. "I can't believe we found you. Do you have any idea what we have been through just trying to get here? To you?"

"I'm sorry, have we met? Am I meant to know you—wait! Mahd ... New Brunswick? There's no way. You actually made it all the way here?"

"Trust us, it wasn't easy," I say. Cutting the two off as my frustration grows, realizing we came all this way only to be locked up alongside the man meant to help us. "And the welcome party we met up with when arriving definitely didn't make it worth it, in case you're wondering."

"Ameira—"

"No, she's right" Ez jumps in. "I'm the one who told you to come here. Told you it would be safe ... I promised everyone it would be safe." His voice trails off, a broken look crossing his face before he physically shakes it off. "It wasn't meant to be this way...it was just a supply run. I only left for a supply run. How?"

Pity fills me as I watch him fight an internal battle with himself. Guilt from snapping at him earlier begins to eat away at me and I look at Mahd, signaling him to say something.

"So, those aren't your people out there?" he asks. Ez nods in reply. "Well, that's a relief, here I was thinking I had just led us across several provinces and straight into a trap."

"No, no. We were safe. Something happened over the course of a few days, but I don't know what. We were on our way back here when we were jumped by the Glories. They knocked us out before we were brought in," Ez explains. "We didn't even know it was here that we were

being taken. Not until they pulled us out of the back of the truck to toss us in to this container. I don't know what happened to my people, or if there are any of them even left."

"I'm sorry," I say, moving closer. "I wish we knew more, but things happened so fast once we pulled in through the gates. Ambushed and ripped out of the vehicle before we knew what was happening. After that, we were dragged straight here. I only seen your friend in the med-tent by chance when brought past it."

"This place seems to be pretty infested with those Glories you mentioned, every one I seen had on those matching uniforms. Unless they are keeping them elsewhere, it appears that your people either joined up or took off," Mahd says.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Ez retorts, his tone defensive.

"—Or disappeared," I cut in. Shooting Mahd a quick glare, telling him not to be so blunt. "We don't know what might have happened. There's been a lot of cleanses lately. One after another."

"Trust me, I know," Ez mutters darkly. "Isn't that why you're here? Why you both came? I know you think I have answers, you shared with me the dreams you have been having. The ones that led you to me, Mahd. You can't deny that it is the reason why you came, why you left your own community."

I know what his goal is by throwing that fact out, that we had also left those we spent years helping build new lives behind. Mahd immediately takes the bait.

"I left to find answers. To find you. Someone who is *seeing* the same types of things I am. Not to find myself locked up next to my wife and the person who told us to come here!" Mahd shouts. His arms wave wildly as he expresses his building frustration.

"Enough with the arguing!" I shout. "You are both arguing over nothing. The point is that we found you, and you two can begin piecing together whatever it is that you know. Maybe we can finally start making sense of some of this."

Noise from outside pauses whatever it is Mahd is about to say. Our attention focused now on the opening of the container door, a figure being shoved in quickly before it is once again closed. Their shirt is covered in dried blood and the side is torn open, revealing bandages underneath.

"Joh! Didn't think I would ever say this, but man, am I glad to see you alive."

Ez's excitement is short lived when he gets a good look at Joh's face. His complexion paling as the two meet in an intense gaze. Joh's burning with a deep fire, his face darkening the longer he stares at Ez. As if threatening him. Blaming him for something.

"Wait, where's Pan?" Ez demands, his question laced with panic. "She left to see you. They were supposed to bring her to you."

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### XVIII: Pan

Location: Claybelt Forest Encampment, Ontario

I can hear him before I see him. His voice coming from inside the large military tent acting as the camp's med area.

"... and I will continue to ruin your day, and annoy you, and cause as many problems as possible until you tell me where my friends are—"

The words are cut off by the sound of a loud slap.

"That's enough," a voice rumbles.

"Told you, hit me as many times as you like, I'm not shutting up until you take me to my friends!" Joh is shouting at this point. His voice cracking with a strong emotion that has me taking off towards the tent.

My neck jerks backward, the collar of my shirt coming up sharply as it digs into my throat. The hand that grabbed it causing me to choke.

"Not so fast, I said we would take you to *see* him. Don't think you can just go running off now," Chauncey says. His grip is tight on the back of my shirt, Mouth close to my ear and breath hot on my neck. "I still want to take you on that walk."

"Hearing him is not seeing him," I retort, jerking my shirt roughly from his hands. "I want to speak with him. He needs to know we are okay. Let him go back to Ez if he is well enough, and I promise to go with you." Bile builds in my throat at knowing what I am committing myself, but time is ticking, and we need to make a move. Any move.

"Well come on then, let's go see your precious friend."

The flap to the tent is open. The scene meeting us inside is set up like a normal medical room, several beds spread out down the length of it are covered in sheets and pillows. An armed man paces the room, clearly acting as a guard. Only two people are in the beds, one is a young

woman who is taking me in just as much as I am her, seeming to make the connection the moment Joh yells out my name in surprise.

"You're okay!" he exclaims joyously. "Oh, thank goodness, I've been yelling myself hoarse for the last day for them to take me to you. Are you guys alright? Where have you been? I almost died you know?"

"Trust me," I say. "It hasn't been for lack of trying to find you. They have us locked up in some container across the property. Sealed up tight, at least I was, until I finally convinced them to take me to you."

My hand grabs his the moment I am close enough to sit down, leaning lightly on the edge of his bed as I take in his bandages. The white cotton wrapping peeking through his torn shirt, the fabric stiff with dried blood. A gruesome reminder of the fact that I almost lost him.

"You scared the hell out of me," I sigh. Rubbing my thumb along the back of his hand to assure myself that he is in front of me, that I didn't lose the last aspect of family I have. "We had no idea where they were taking you. You were so pale..."

"Hey, hey... it's okay. I'm okay. I mean sure, I'm going to have one cool scar to brag about once it heals up, but that's not really a negative if you ask me." He reassures jokingly, shooting a suggestive eyebrow raise at the woman in the bed next to him. "Heard they are a real hit with the ladies."

I can see that what he says gets to her. A small smile trying to tug at the corner of her mouth before she turns her head, her hair covering her expression.

"How cute, I'll pass though," she says. Her voice is soft, but laced with annoyance. Turning to address me, she continues. "So, you here to take him back with you? I have had about my fill of him over the past two days."

Joh lets out a loud snort of laughter before I can reply to her. His face wincing as he lets out a hiss of pain, hand gripping his side.

"Oh, please woman, you have been loving my company and you know it!" he banters back, a boyish grin on his face.

"Yea, Joh tends to be an acquired taste," I cut in. A genuine smile breaking out on my face for the first time in days. "And even then, he can sometimes be a bit hard to swallow."

She smiles at me, eyes darting to look at Joh quickly before he can catch her.

"I'm ReeRee," she states. Her hand coming out in an offer to shake mine. "You are obviously Pan, nice to meet you. Maybe now Joh can finally shut up for a few minutes. Never realized how much I appreciated my solitary confinement in here until he showed up."

"I'll have you know that I have been a fantastic—"

"No one cares," Chauncey butts in. Cutting off Joh's angry retort and pulling up close behind me, his shirt brushing against my back. "We held up our end of the bargain, now it's time for you to hold up yours."

"Bargain? What bargain?" Joh questions, his face turning pale as he takes in Chauncey's position. "Pan, what did you promise him? Tell me you didn't agree to something stupid, especially for me?"

I force myself to meet his eyes, knowing that the second I do, I won't be able to hide the truth from him.

"I had to," I whisper. Meeting his gaze for only a quick moment. "I had to know if you were okay, to get you out of here and back with us. Don't worry, I'll be fine. I promised Chauncey here a quick little walk, won't be long at all ... You just get back to Ez, and both of you *be ready* for me once I get there. We will have a lot to catch up on..."

I let my sentence trail off, knowing that I can't put too much emphasis on my words, but I hope the hint I am trying to drop in at the end hits its mark. The hint for them to be ready for me, because I have no plans of returning to the container with Chauncey in tow. ReeRee had let out a short gasp when I mentioned Ez, which is what I intended. To draw attention to our fellow ally, one she has probably been fearing is dead, just as he has been worrying about her. The hint being the only one I can give her.

"No, I can't just let you go with them? You can't be serious," Joh says. I can tell that something has changed in his tone, he is still combative against the idea of me going but it comes with an underlying defeat. As if he knows we have to put on a show for the two men watching us.

"You have to," I reply. Keeping my voice small, acting like I have given in to the demands Chauncey has on me. Turning to speak to the man behind me, I give Joh's hand a tight squeeze before releasing it. "Have Roger take Joh back to the container so I know that you complete the agreement we have. You and I can go for that walk."

Chauncey's hand comes over my shoulder, gently brushing back the loose strands of hair. As if stroking a pet, one he plans to slaughter soon. "Deal. Let's go."



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## XIX: Kol

Location: Hudson's Bay, Ontario, Canada.

Coral Harbour had clearly housed some form of a population for the last little while. The surrounding buildings showing enough signs of recent life that finding a few individuals once we were on there could be a concern. I made sure we took some weapons on this latest convoy, just in case the last cleanse didn't wipe this place clean.

"Hurry up and load the rafts, Gentleman! Anchors are going up the second I get back on that ship" I shout. "And if you think I am above leaving some of you behind, you are sadly mistaken.

A feeling of satisfaction fills me as I watch my crew scramble in and out of the storefronts and buildings, looking like little frantic ants after hearing what I just said. Their arms straining with supplies, the hulls of our small rafts used for transport showing themselves to be almost maxed out.

"Lookin' like we're all filled up Captain," Greer calls from his spot on the docks. "Anymore and we won't be able to fit everyone back in one trip. Water levels are getting too low to make any more passes."

"Just finish that one in front of you, load it with the rest of the boxes," I say. His reaction makes it clear that he knows what I am planning, and I stand still at the end of the docks. Eyeing him to see if he will object, or say anything that will alert people to what he knows I will do.

"Kol, come on man..." his voice trails off, barely audible over the movement around us. His gaze hot as he stares at me, urging me to change my mind as his hands grip his clipboard anxiously. "I can do two runs, I'll come back for them, won't take long at all."

"It's Captain. Not Kol. Not to you, or anyone else on this ship. You would do well to remember that. Now get them to load the damn boat, we're leaving." My voice is hard, but I do my best to keep it low enough for others not to pick up on the tension between us.

"Yes, Captain," Greer replies, shoulders slumped in defeat. His feet drag heavily as he walks the length of the dock, his arms waving as he begins to direct those carrying supplies towards the final load.

My guilt tugs at me, the feeling seeping deeply within my chest but I quickly shake it off. It is always a shame to have to sever ties with those you have survived alongside, but the bad seeds must be uprooted, tossed out, and left to fend for themselves. A weeding out of the harmful to allow the rest to thrive. And I needed everyone on my crew to be loyal, especially with knowing what is coming.

"Captain, the last of the boats are loaded, some already headed out now," Greer calls out as he approaches me from the other side of the docks. A few of the stragglers from the crew following along behind him.

"Good," I say. "Let's get going then."

I jump down lightly into the hull of the small cargo boat that had carried Greer and I over. The back end of it piled up with some of the supplies I had chosen for myself.

"Are we to wait? Or go with you?"

The question comes from Leon, one of the self-appointed leaders of the main group seeming to distance themselves from me over the past couple weeks. The one whose eyes held a mocking amusement during my speech this morning, too comfortable with the act of going around behind my back.

"What do you mean?" I ask. Placing an overly innocent look on my face. "Why would you come with us on my boat? You've made it perfectly clear over the last little while that the few of you would be better at leading us than me. I'm under the impression you are finding your own way back to the ship?"

The group of men are silent, trying to read the seriousness behind my statement as they look around desperately at the other boats the remaining crewmen are in, but the small convoy has already gone and is close to reaching where the ship is anchored. None of those in the boats looked behind to see the situation going down on the docks between the others and their Captain.

"You can't just leave us here, you took all the working boats. What are we meant to do?" Leon is yelling now. His face red as he begins to panic, the others shifting anxiously behind him.

"Swim? Stay here?" I suggest, listing the options off quickly. My voice harsh. "Frankly, I don't really care what you do. All I know is I am headed back on the boat I came in on, and you can figure it out yourselves. Since you have all been so keen to doubt me, maybe you'd rather just not come back at all."

"Greer, please..." Leon tries, his hand reaching out in an attempt to grasp the man's arm. Greer moves to dodge the action, dropping down into the boat beside me.

"No can-do man, you heard the Captain," Greer says. His gaze staring through the group of men still on the dock in front of him.

"You're not leaving us here!" shouts one of the other men. His figure darts forward, aiming for the boat. "There are six of us, and two of you. You are not leaving. We won't let yo—"

Whatever he is about to say next is cut off by the bullet from my gun entering the front of his throat and exploding out the other side. His mouth gapes in surprise as he slowly registers what happened, his hand coming up to cover his throat in an impossible attempt to staunch the flow of blood. The eyes draining of life while his chest heaves and he chokes, fighting for air as his lungs fill.

Leon does his best to hold the man up before it is useless, the rest of them being forced to watch their friend pass horribly at their feet.

"Now, as I said before we were rudely interrupted, make it back to the ship if you can. I will take it as your pledge of loyalty," I say. My voice is calm as I take in the stream of red draining through the slates of the dock boards. The water beneath turning dark with the blood of my old crewmate. "One that will wipe the slate clean of all your hardships, and you will be welcomed back with open arms. And if not,... then we shall see each other again in the final battle."

Their response is cut off by the sound of the engine, Greer shifting into reverse as we slowly pull away from the dock. The gun held loosely in my hand, keeping eye contact with Leon as long as I can.

"We have enough."

"What was that Greer?" I ask over the sound of the boat crossing the surface of the water. "Have enough what?"

"Enough supplies. We have enough from this last raid to last all of us, we didn't need to leave them behind. They will never be able to swim against this current, they will be sucked out towards the open ocean with the riptide and you know it."

His voice is tight, eyes refusing to meet mine, locked tightly on the horizon in front of us as he drives us out into the middle of the bay, where our ship sits anchored.

"It's about loyalty Greer," I reason. "They were the ones starting whispers, dangerous ones. A point needed to be made, they just so happen to be the examples used."

Greer remains silent beside me, face taugth with emotion, but I ignore it. I know that he will continue to follow wherever it is I tell him we are going, no matter what.

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"Greer, collect everyone. Meet me on the main deck as soon as possible, we need to get these anchors up and ready, but I need to brief the crew on what is coming."

His agreeance comes in a silent nod, his figure disappearing down into the lower deck.

Leon and the others are tiny specks out on the docks from my stance on the ship. Crowded together, probably trying to decide what is the best option for them, but I know that no matter what they are pretty much doomed. If my careful studying of the ocean radar and the dropping of sea level is correct, then there is no way they will be able to find an altitude high enough to escape what's building out there. Swimming, or even finding a boat they could row, will be useless. There is no way to fight the rushing current now, the tiny motor on the boat we took back out here had strained against the tugging of the ocean waves, and forced us to make several attempts at unloading.

*A pity really, I think to myself. Such a waste of good labour, and Leon was the best cook on board—but the last thing I need right now is disloyalty. I will give my all to protect those who stand with me, don't understand why any of them would have risked that. Knowing how I am.*

Years worth of dreams have led me to this exact moment, it is all coming together exactly as I foresaw it happening. The nightly visions that I use to have growing up were filled with horrifying images: destruction of the world, life dying, people turning on each other. My friends thought I was insane. The old captain of this shipping boat, my boss, threatened to have me committed when I finally confessed to him the reason that I so desperately sought out a connection to the ocean; a place onboard a ship with a crew. I tried to explain to him that I had already walked through the present we were living in, in my dreams, for so many years, and I knew how things have to happen.

He called me crazy too, just like my parents did growing up. When they sent me away to a military school, thinking that my nightmares were just selfish calls for attention. Leaving me to the night terrors that tormented me every night, and stuck to my thoughts in the day as I slugged through years of school. They were lucky that the day I got out of there at 18 was the day the first cleanse hit. Taking them with it. I don't know what I would have done if I ever saw them again, after abandoning me like they did and leaving me to feel like an orphan.

I had to wait out the few years between the cleanses, the length of time until the next one was unpredictable. Something I didn't figure out until I was able to get my hands on some of the old texts. The texts I paid for through an easy bribe to those running the archives sections. It was a few months after the first cleanse by then and people were desperate for the extra money and supplies. It was easy. And what I found was more than worth all the travel and troubles of tracking down the individuals who could help me get what I want. Now it is finally time for

everything to play out. So many called me a dreamer, that it is all just myth, stories written in fake scriptures, but now it's proven to all be true. It's a shame that none of those doubters are still around to see it.

Greer's voice carries up from below, signaling the incoming crowd, and a spike of anxiousness rolls through me. Now I needed to explain to them my plan for what the ocean is foreshadowing, that our placement in Hudson's Bay is not just for a supply run, but to serve as a safe haven. Or at least one that I hope will work as one, praying that the surrounding islands of Hudson's Bay will be enough to buffer some of the impact of the waves, and that the water will rise here. Giving us a chance to ride out the front of the Tsunami, for it to give us long enough of a push that we can avoid the destruction.

But now it all comes down to whether or not they will still believe me, and take my word of knowing the ocean's mannerisms to have figured this all out on my own. I cannot tell them the deeper meaning, not to them anyway. They are not who I need to convince of the prophecies.

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XX: Ez

Location: Claybelt Forest Camp, Ontario, Canada.

"Oh, I seen her, that creepy jerk brought her to me. But tell me this Ez, where do you get off letting her make a stupid deal like that? She's gone off with that psycho!"

Joh's voice is deathly, his tone calm but his eyes glare daggers at me, and as relieved as I feel knowing that Pan was taken where she was meant to go, the look on his face is enough to tell me that I should never have let her.

"I tried, she—"

"Yea well, you failed, didn't you," Joh says angrily.

"Your friend didn't give him much of a choice," Mahd cuts in, eyeing us both tentatively. "She was very clear on her decision; I feel like you know she wouldn't have listened if he tried to force her to stay anyway."

"I'm sorry, who are you exactly? Why are you talking right now?" Joh snaps at him, and I flinch. Wishing Pan was here to chill him out.

"Easy Joh, he's done nothing wrong. You should know when Pan sets her mind to something, there is no talking her out of it," I say. "Especially when it comes to you...there was no way she wasn't agreeing to a deal once they said they were going to take her to you."

I know that it is a low blow to phrase it that way, that all it did was put her current predicament on Joh. And I can see that it lands where I aimed, his face falling as he gulps loudly. Eyes seeming to mist over.

"Listen, she's going to be fine. She's tougher than both of us, I'm sure she will be back soon."

"Yea, I mean, that's what she said anyway," he admits. His hand comes up to run his fingers in his hair, his face red from embarrassment of his previous action. "She also hinted that she wanted us to be ready for something when she does, and knowing her it is because she is going to try and pull one on him when they are alone. A terrifying fact, but either way we need to be ready for her."



My head nods along as I listen to him, heart speeding up as I realize she is getting ready to make a move. We just had to be there for whatever it is, and pray that she actually pulls it off.

"I'm not sure that there is much we can do until we are let out of here, so let's just hope whatever she is planning works out," I say, pausing slightly before continuing. "But there is more we need to tell you. About who these people are, and why they are here."

"Well, it's about time you finally feel like opening up about some things," Joh retorts, eyes rolling. "Besides, I've got a lot to catch you up on as well."

"Oh yea, what's that?" I ask, beginning to pull the small table out from the wall so we all had a place to sit while planning things out.

"I found ReeRee."

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## XXI: Pan

Location: Claybelt Forest Encampment, Ontario, Canada

The camp really is impressive. The space itself isn't huge, but it has been laid out well. The stable structures of the bigger buildings being used to build extensions off of, housing small community areas. Old picnic tables have been placed intermittently throughout, acting as a sort of make-shift courtyard. The area was obviously made for large groups of people that had lived here with Ez when the place was thriving. Only a few individuals are scattered throughout now, but they appeared to just be going on with their days, set on some schedule that must be keeping this place running now that the Glories have taken it over. If one didn't know any better, the

place would almost seem like a normal community, with couples holding hands as they strolled long, others sharing tables and laughs.

I know that it is all a veil to the darker truths that lay beneath. The bulging of barely concealed weapons, and the shifting eyes of some of the women sitting at the tables, spoke loudly of the actions taken to create the vision of the space around me. But it is enough for me to be able to witness what it was Ez had built here, and a part of me mourns it for him, knowing that any life we all had built over the last few years is really gone forever.

"So, what do you think?"

Chauncey leans in towards me, his mouth coming close to my ear to ask the question. Sharing a secret that I didn't ask to hear. He had been quiet since we left the med-tent, although his smugness at getting time with me is obvious.

"What I think," I start. Pulling away in disgust from his closeness, as the stench of his breath sat like a cloud around me. "Is that if you wanted to act like the camp tour guide, you could have invited the others. How about we get around to whatever it is that you really want from me, and I can turn it down – as we both know I will – and you can drop me back off with my friends in the c-can, yea?"

Chauncey's laugh is loud, drawing the attention of those around us in a way that makes me uneasy. Several of the others smirking in our direction, as if let in on whatever joke had made Chauncey burst out.

"You know Pan, this attitude of yours isn't making the impression you want it to. The angrier you get, the more I plan to keep you around. I hope you know that."

His eyes harden as he locks them with mine, and my body responds with its first real jolt of fear. My eyes watering as I fight off the flinch and hold his gaze the best I can.

"You talk this nice with all the women you force on dates?" My joke comes out flat, voice staying as level as possible. Forcing myself to break his gaze, I continue walking, pretending that the interruption to wherever he is taking me didn't happen and that I can get him to a more isolated location before making my move.

"Nah, just you. You're special," he says. "But you know that don't you? Someone with a fire such as yours... Now stop dragging your feet, I got somewhere to show you before I take you to meet our head guy. He's been asking about all of you, he just doesn't need to know you and I took a little stroll first."

His hand brushes lightly against my back, guiding me in the direction of the few paths that led off from the communal area, appearing to be another section leading to a set of more private cabin-style structures. Small mod-homes are spaced out along the path, with trees acting as dividers between them that offered privacy those in the tents didn't have. It is clear this place was given to the upper Glories, the one's who did the *righteous* work for the group. Yet I doubt one of them had a callous on their hand, or garden soil on their boots, since showing up here.

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It is not until Chauncey closes the door of his cabin loudly behind him that my heart really begins to pound. The reality of my predicament hitting me and my eyes rake the interior, looking for anything I will be able to use to my advantage.

"They really set you up nice here, didn't they?" I ask, hoping to stall him enough to figure out a plan. "They must have some big plans for this place if they went through all this trouble of moving you guys out here."

"Huge." He replies. "Take a seat." His hand waves towards the small table, before walking over to the mini fridge and pulling out two beers. I don't know the brand but I can tell by the shape of the bottles what they are. Something that had become a luxury over the past few years, the old bootleggers having sold out their stocks not long after everything hit the fan. I realize now that most of them were probably just robbed of what they had.

"I don't drink," I say. Grabbing the bottle, I slide it back across the table towards him.

"Aw, come on. That's just because you're young, you didn't get to experience the world for all the fun things it had before it all changed." He tries to reason, placing a smile on his face that did nothing but send another chill down my spine.

"Hmm tempting, but no."

His hand tightens on the bottle at the sarcasm laced heavily in my words. I know I am pushing his patience at this point, but I don't care. Now that we are alone, it is just a matter of me picking the right moment.

"So, my boss is really curious about all of you, which honestly made me interested in the first place. I mean, he takes interest in everyone we come across, wanting to find out what it is exactly that makes them *them*, you know? The part of their character that has kept them here, instead of disappearing with the rest."

"What do you mean, the part that kept them here?" I ask, trying to keep the curiosity that has been spiked out of my voice. "Do you know something about where people are going?"

"Where? No," He scoffs. "That's a question our group is still searching for, but as for the Why... that's something we do know. Or at least have mostly figured out." He pauses to have a drink from his beer, taking loud gulps from the bottle. "You know, the fact that this is seeming like big news to you, tells me that you and your friends are a lot more out of the loop than we all first thought," he says. His tone mocking as he smirks at me from across the table. "You really haven't taken a moment to ask *why* you seem to still be here, when all the people you loved have disappeared?"

"I mean, obviously there have been theories... Government intervention, paranormal, tons of stuff. There always—"

"I'm not talking about those crazy crackpot government conspiracists, or the whispers you have heard from the neighbours of whatever small town you're from. I mean real truths, the ones etched in the myths and scriptures of our world's history."

A part of me wants to laugh at what he is suggesting, beginning to think that this is already turning into a pitch for me to join their group, but the other part of me sees the seriousness in his eyes, and wants to believe what he is saying. To finally have answers, even if they were coming from a group not meant to be trusted.

"You're saying what? That this all really is the end-of-days apocalypse my mom's church has been preaching for years?" I ask. Remembering the days mom would come home, talking about how the darkness of the world was foretelling of one thing or another. My father and I

humouring her rants from the spot on the couch that we had spent Sunday morning watching cartoons.

"In part, yes, but they weren't the only ones who warned of it. Basically, every form of scripture, myth, legend, you-name-it, does as well. Just as each world religion or belief has its own tale of Creation, they have their own tale of destruction. A complete end to everything, and the promise of belonging to something new. Something more. All one has to do is read the writings that have been worshipped throughout history, it's all there. The entire story of how our world ends, the cleanses, all of it. It just had to be pieced together."

"So, if that's true, and the answer to everything that has been happening is so easily found, why isn't it widely known? Why are you acting as if this is some big revelation if, like you said, the truth of it has been written about for thousands of years?"

He finds my doubt funny. His head shaking in a humour that felt odd for the tense situation we're in, like he was speaking with a child that couldn't understand even the more basic thing.

"Simply put, those who are behind those writings carried through history, were never really all on the best of terms. I mean, think about it Sweetheart, how often did your mother exchange her Christian scripture stories with those who attended the Mosque down the street? The truth about the similarities in all the stories is hidden in the very books that those, who believe in such a thing, would not even read."

"Okay so let's say this does add up, and everything you're saying is true, " I reasoned. "Why are you telling me all this? Seems like some knowledge that your boss would be against you saying."

"Why not?" He laughs. Getting up from the table and putting the two empty beer bottles into the sink, having popped the second one and downed it during our conversation. "Honestly, it surprised me to find out how much you *don't* know. Even the things I just told you aren't even the full tip of what is a giant iceberg we are only beginning to figure out. Plus, I thought if I helped you out, you could help me out..."

It is impossible to miss the hint that underlays his last sentence. The innuendo of wanting something from me dripping on the words, but I decide to choose to ignore it.

"Like I said before, I don't know anything about what is going on. I don't know anything, but the fact that I want to get back to my friends," I retort, hoping that he takes the loud hint of my rejection. "You gave me the tour, you showed me your little cabins, reveled in the fact that you know more than all of us to fulfill whatever ego trip you felt you needed to. Now it's time to take me back, just like you said."

"Oh, I believe you when you said that you didn't know anything, Pan, but that's not the kind of help I mean, and you know that," he says. Having moved from his position next to the sink, now standing close behind me.

He brushes aside the hair lying across my shoulder with his fingertips, his loud breathing slowing behind me. "They treat us good here you know, if you were to stay, you'd probably like it. Stay here with me."

His hand is now stroking the length of my neck, the other grips my opposite shoulder tightly. I jerk against his hold, but my position pushed up against the table only gives me a few inches.

"Not happening," I say, my voice hard. His hand fighting mine as I do my best to pry it from my shoulder. "Get your hands off me. Only warning."

Air is forced from my lungs as he shoves my chair in hard against the table, trying to pin me down as his hands claw at my shoulders. My mind freezes for only a moment, before my body acts. One palm flattening on the underside of the table as the other hand quickly grabs the top edge, flipping it up and over as I stand up in one swift movement. Using all the strength in my legs to drive my heels into the ground, I shove hard against Chauncey to break his hold. His shock lasts for only a split second before he is on me again, one hand wrapping around my throat as his other does its best to defend the blows coming from me. Arms flying as I try to get in as many shots as I can, aiming at his weakest points like I was taught to do. It is a well-placed hit to his adam's apple that gives me the in I need, his one free hand coming up to cradle his throat as he loosens the grip on mine. Swinging both my arms up and over his, I clasp them together tight at the top before bringing them down as hard as I can. Slamming my conjoined fists onto his arm, and I can feel the elbow joint give in to the hit with a sharp pop. Chauncey letting out a loud cry as it does. Letting go of my throat, he backs off, gripping his arm in pain.

"You broke my arm, you bitch!" He snarls at me, hand fumbling in his pocket. He takes out the knife he used to hurt Joh and flips it open. The blade picking up the light of the fireplace burning inside the cabin. "I'll kill you!"

His swipes are wide, panicked, desperate to connect with any part of me. He advances, following me as I walk backwards dodging his swings as they come. The tipped over table hits the back of my knees and before I can do anything, my body falls backward over the edge. Legs flying up as my back connects hard with the cabin's floor. My head stings from its impact on the ground, and stars fill my vision as I blindly try to right myself. Chauncey's shadow is instantly



above me, his arms reaching down over the side, trying to get me. Turning to place my back against the cupboards, I kick hard against the side of the fallen table, knocking it into Chauncey and causing him to fall back.

He lets out a yell of frustration and pain, his broken arm having taken the brunt of the fall. Slowly pulling himself up from the ground, he picks up his knife, shoving the chairs and table out of the way to get to me. Managing to stand up, I freeze as I wait for him, taking deep breaths, and centering myself in the split seconds that I have. Knowing that I am only going to get one shot at this.

His arm darts out with a strong accuracy this time, coming in quick and straight towards my ribs. My body barely dodging it as I feel it tear through the side of my shirt, but I use the momentum the best I can. My hand comes up from behind, gripping the empty beer bottle I grabbed from the sink, and smashing it in one smooth movement across Chauncey's temple. The glass shatters and I squint my eyes to avoid the shards, but he isn't as lucky. He screams out as several pieces of glass are lodged into the side of his face, blood quickly escaping from the open wounds. His hands drop the knife as they come up to grip his face, his eyes blinking rapidly as they try to flush themselves from the debris.

I take my chance.

Using both hands to shove him back, I dart towards the fireplace. Crashing sounds behind me alert me to the fact that even in his current state Chauncey is still trying to get to me, but the blood from the cuts on his head must be obscuring his vision. My hand closes around the top of the poker stick for the fire the same moment he is able grasp my arm. His bloody hand slipping slightly as I try to pull away.

"Come here—"

Whatever he is about to say next is cut off by the impact of the long poker across his head, and he drops heavily onto the carpet beside me. The dent of the metal poker runs itself along the side of his head, the majority of it having connected with his temple. There is so much blood now, the light brown carpet slowly seeping with a large dark stain. The poker makes a loud thud as I drop it, my mind slowing as my body finally stops the constant dump of adrenaline it had given me over the last few minutes.

My hands begin to shake lightly as they hang loosely at my sides, the reality of what had just happened settling in. I doubt that he is still breathing, and I know I am too scared to check. To know that I had killed a person, taken another life. Even if I didn't have a choice.

"Okay Pan," I whisper to myself. My voice still sounding too loud for the now silent cabin. "It's okay. You're okay. You just need to get the hell out of here before someone finds you."

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## XXII: Kol

Location: Hudson's Bay, Canada.

We've stationed ourselves the best we could, but the sea is unpredictable. I can't really know how to direct us until we will be in the thick of it.

For all we know, our efforts to protect us won't work, and we will just end up being the sitting ducks that we are, holding on to unrealistic hope. Either way, it held a better chance than the options left for those we abandoned on the docks, and any poor souls still out there. Most

unbeknownst to what is about to hit them. None of the men have been seen since, Greer using the binoculars to try to spot them but gave up after a few minutes of seeing no movement out there.

"Greer, quit the gambling and come here. We need to talk," I say. The man's head snaps up from his hand of cards, face tight with annoyance. "Don't give me that look, you've already lost your next two rations in the other rounds. Give it up, poker just isn't your game."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence. I was on my way to getting it back, I had the hand I needed," he replies. Tossing his cards onto the table in front of him before marching away in a huff.

"No, he didn't," shouted one of the others. Having collected the hand after Greer stepped away. "Probably would have been down another meal."

Greer is quick to spin around, getting a few steps in before I can grasp the back of his collar. Jerking him to a halt.

"Enough. This is serious. Downstairs in my cabin Greer, *now*. And as for the rest of you, focus more on watching our horizon and radar readings for any changes, instead of gambling for rations that will mean nothing if we are killed within the next day."

The main deck begins to disperse, the crewman scuttling like cockroaches when you turn on the light.

"You," I say. Pointing to the closest one to me. "No one comes down to the cabin area until I say so directly. If anyone overhears us, I blame you."

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The table in my cabin begins to fill up with the texts I pull from the storage underneath my bed. Greer's brows furrowing deeper with each title he reads.

"What's all this?" he asks. Grabbing the top title of the stack, he flips through to the first tab I had placed inside.

"You've been wanting answers, haven't you? Well, I'm going to tell you. Everything. At least what I've figured out myself." Taking a seat across from him I lean forward, holding his gaze so he can know how serious I am.

"What do you believe in Greer?" I can tell my question confuses him, so I elaborate. "Like when you die, what do you think happens?"

"Are you asking if I'm religious? Because I told you when I first met you that after an upbringing like mine, I am not keen to believe in much."

"No Greer. At this point we are past the idea of how we all used to perceive religion or spirituality. The time to worry about following moral structures to gain favor is over," I say.

"You seem to be saying a lot but not really telling me anything," Greer retorts. "Spit it out. What are you trying to get at Kol?"

"What I am getting at, is that all of this. Everything that's been happening, has already been told. In these books," I say, gesturing at the piles in front of us. "Each one. A warning of the same thing. Describing all of the events we are actually living through. Right. Now."

"Are you trying to tell me this is some religious end of the world?"

"Yes."

His mouth snaps shut, his eyes studying me. My bluntness has taken him back, causing him to pause.

"Shit, you're not joking... Come on Kol, I mean I get things have been stressful and everyone wants answers, but..." His voice trails off, Greer's hands shuffling through things in front of him.

"I'm telling you, it's all here. The people disappearing, the landscape dying, earthquakes, blood red suns, and oceans changing," I argue. "Every single unexplainable thing is all written right here."

"So, all these talk about the apocalypse of the planet? An actual end of days?"

"Apocalypse, Eschaton, Revelations, Sermon of the Seven Suns, Ragnarök, Seven Fires Prophecy," I reply. Holding up each religious or mythological text that held the story I mention. "It's been called many names. The story written using many variations and sources, but at its core, all warning of the coming end."

Several beats pass. The cabin now silent, the only sounds being the creaking of the movement from the rest of the crew upstairs.

"If this is true—"

"And it is," I interject, before waving him on to continue.

"Then, that must mean a time of judgement is coming? For all of us?" He asks.

"No, it's not coming. It already happened Greer," I say. My head shaking sadly. "That's what the cleanses were."

"Then why are we all still here? It can't have happened already."

I can tell he is getting frustrated but I don't care, feeling myself hit a breaking point as well at how oblivious he is being. My hand slams down on the table, causing everything to shake as my water glass from earlier tips over.

"You're still not getting it. We are still here because we didn't make the cut. None of us did."

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### XXIII: Ez

Location: Claybelt Compound, Ontario, Canada.

The lock is slid back, and the door opened before we have much time to react. Several of the men enter, but Pan isn't with them and I shoot a quick glance at Joh. Both of us seeming to silently ask each other, *Now what?*

Our plan had been to either wait for Pan to break us out, or hear whatever she found out when someone brought her back. Only Roger is the familiar face within the group. My body going cold when I realize Chauncey still isn't with him.

"Come on, let's go," Roger barks out. "Boss wants to see you, grab your stuff. You won't be back."

"Where's Pan? I'm not leaving without her," Joh says.

His question is ignored, and we are quickly dragged out of the c-can. The guards remaining deaf to our shouted complaints as their rough hands lead us out.

When looking around, the last few days could have all been a nightmare. My home looked the same as it did before. The courtyard of tables still full of bodies, but I know none of

my people are apart of them, and if they are, I don't think I would want to call them allies anymore.

It is made obvious where we are headed. The main building on the property that had been built for the Ranger Station. The structure situated far into the land causes my gut to sink, knowing that we are now the furthest we could possibly be from the lot with all the vehicles. Our earlier escape plan now completely useless because the rest of them wouldn't know the way, and the chance of me leading them there to give them a head start is even more slim.

"Joh, stop fighting before you rip out your damn stitches," I say to the struggling man.

He has been continuously pulling against the Glorie holding him, trying to break free but the guard wasn't giving in. Probably because Joh tried to make a break for it the moment we left the c-can, making it about ten feet before they caught him, still weak from his injuries. I'm sure the Glories thought he was trying to escape the camp, but I knew he was only running to find Pan.

The inside of the building looks as it did before: random office desks spread out, the doors leading to the bathrooms and small staff kitchen take up the back wall. The only real striking difference is that one of the larger oak desks has been pushed into the center at the far end. As if it now stood in its own place of command. A man sits at it, his hands folded, unblinking eyes staring at us with their dark gaze. Emotionless, watching us enter like he is a statue. The only clue given that the man is real, is the slow grin that breaks across his face as we approach. The smile seeming to stretch the lower half too much, splitting his face open and reminding me of the joker from the comic books my brothers and I grew up reading.

"Welcome, welcome," he greets as we are ushered closer to him. His voice sounds genuine, arms spread wide to embrace us from afar. "Please come in, and sit. I've been anxiously awaiting this meeting since you all showed up."

"And yet, we spent days locked up in the c-can." Mahd retorts. "How kind of you." Mahd does nothing to keep the contempt out of his voice, and Joh snorts loud at how fast the smile drops from the head of the Glories face.

"Yes, well, I am a busy man, and so are those who work for me." The man has lost the fake aura of pleasantries initially seen when we came in. His tone is harsh, lips now pressed into a thin line. "Besides, I figured you could all use some time to calm down. I heard you were a bit riled up when coming in, how are those stitches holding up by the way?" His question is obviously rhetorical, meant to poke fun at the fact that we were helpless to the actions of his men.

"Good. Nothing but a small scratch," Joh says. His joking tone nonexistent for once.

"Hmmm..." the man replies. His smirk now back as he eyes all of us. Spanning over Ameira's unblinking glare from beside Mahd before circling back to Joh and I. "Seems that I am just noticing the one I've been so excited to meet, isn't here. Tell me, where is your friend? Pan, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask *your* friends?" I say. Motioning with my hand towards Roger standing with the others. "Him and his buddy left with her hours ago, yet only he came back."

Roger has paled considerably since I began speaking. His beady eyes flicking between his boss and the front door, willing Chauncey and Pan to enter through it.



"It was just a walk, Gedeon. He was meant to be back by now with her. I was going to mention my growing concern when we first came in but—"

Roger snaps his mouth closed, halting mid sentence at the wave of his boss's hand, the action stealing his voice.

"Enough. I didn't ask for an explanation, I asked for someone. Find her. Now. Tell Chauncey to begin counting his blessings, and to pray that he has enough to overcome whatever urges have led him to be so disloyal."

Gedeon only gets a quick nod in response from Roger before the latter is striding out the door, slamming it behind him.

"My apologies," Gedeon says. The abrupt change in his demeanour coming off as unsettling. "I had intended for this meeting to go over a lot better. New additions to our group are getting far and few in-between, and this place was meant to be welcoming to you."

"We didn't come for you," Ameira interrupts. She had been quiet since we left the c-can, but I knew she'd been paying attention. Her eyes swiveling constantly on the way over, mentally imprinting a map of everything we passed. If things went wrong when trying to escape, I know she could get them out. "We came because we heard of Ez and the community he helped set up. We were seeking out another group like ours, to begin again, in hopes that we could come together, but that place has been destroyed. Our safe haven gone, only to be replaced with a shell you are trying to claim as your own."

Gedeon's laugh is loud, lacking any real humour. "Oh, so full of spark, and yet all of you are so empty of knowledge. Of truth," he says. His fist pounding the desk when he says the last two words. "You don't even know anything do you? About who I am? Who we are?"

"Sure, we do," Joh cuts in. I bite back a groan of annoyance at what I know is coming by his tone, and that it isn't going to go well. "You're the infamous group that everyone's heard about! Take, steal, murder, all in the act of being self-righteous dicks who—"

Joh takes a blow to the back of the knees by a nearby guard. The low kick causing his legs to buckle as he stumbles forward, his hands gripping the back of one the chairs as his sore side slams into it.

"Watch how you speak," the guard says, coming up close on Joh as the rest of us circle in.

"Many don't understand our actions unfortunately," Gedeon sighs, as if sad over the revelation. His hand motioning at the guard to stand down. "Our path is clear to those willing to understand. To ignore differences and come together under our ideal to begin rebuilding our cleansed world."

"And who's ideal is everyone meant to follow? Yours?" I ask. The absurdity of his dramatic monologue starting to get to me. "I've heard of the things your men have done; we all have. You are no one to lead anyone."

"Not my own ideal, but the world's prophecies. The ones that have called for it," Gedeon says. An eerie smile on his face. "I am simply the one chosen to rebuild during the time of our bodily resurrections. These years of cleanses were our apocalypse, it is over now, the worthy have been chosen. The earth is ready now for those left to begin anew."

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## XXIV: Kol

Location: Hudson Bay, Canada.

An air horn blares loudly from the crewman I had posted on the top deck, his call the warning we are all waiting for.

"Greer, begin the rounds. Make sure everything is sealed and the crew has tied down all the stuff we couldn't bring down to the storage areas"

The man is out the door before I can finish speaking, his shouts for status reports from the other crew echoing the ship. Taking the ladder steps two at a time, I launch myself onto the top deck and straight into a full sprint.

"Where?" I shout, grabbing the binoculars offered to me. I can hear it before I can get the lenses to focus. Sounding like the roar of an oncoming jet engine, the noise rumbling across the sky towards us.

The water near the opening of Hudson's Bay is rising now, rapidly swelling up as it begins to overcome the banks of the smaller islands closer to the openness of the Atlantic.

"It's not that bad, she can handle that Captain. It'll be rough, but the ship will take it. The radar is going nuts and reading crazy levels right now, gauges spinning nonsense." Greer's voice comes from close to my left, his duties with the crew handled. "We're going to have to track this old school way."

"No, my friend, it is just the beginning," I reply, passing him the binoculars. The little hope I had dwindling. "Look, focus out as far as you can on the horizon. What do you see?"

"I'm telling you, all I can see is the horizon out there and the rising levels in front of us."

"Because that's not the horizon Greer, look closer. It's moving," I say. Frustrated that he wasn't getting it. "It's the first wave, and who knows what the hell is following along behind it."

"No, that's impossible," he gasps. His face paling behind the binoculars.

"Our concept of the impossible and the possible died the moment the first cleanse happened," I reply. "

The ship rocks heavily to the side as the incoming sea level begins to pour into the bay. The smaller islands it breeched now almost fully submersed beneath. The water creeping in and filling the large lake like a bath-tub. Our boat rises along with it, as the current continues to push forward from the face of the oncoming tsunami. Loud complaints sound from the large chains of our anchors as they are tested against the drag of the water.

"We need to raise the anchors, they're about to snap," Greer panics. His eyes widening in the dim light that has been our reality since the last cleanse.

"No. We hold the anchors where they are. At least as long as the chains can handle it." My voice is steady, but my mind is anything but. "Tell everyone to get down below and stay there until this is all over."

Turning to the two other crewmen up top with us, I take in their faces. Silently thanking them for being with me, knowing this is very likely the last time I will see them. But I always knew there was going to be sacrifices made.

"You two, take your posts near the anchors. We are going to need those to hold until the right moment. Do what you can, because if these fail early our chances drop even closer to zero."

Climbing as far up on the mast that I can, I watch the wall of water grow closer to the point of Quebec. The wall barreling through the Hudson Strait, over taking everything in its path. The immensity of it causing me to grip tighter to my post. Gulping down panic.

"Please crest, please break.... come on," I whisper. My eye sockets pressed tightly into the opening of the binoculars. The initial flooding had taken up more depth than I estimated for. My hope being that the encompassing land of the bay would be enough to slow the oncoming waves down. The shallowness forcing it to curl over, and the break would have it be nothing more than a few after shock sized waves for us to deal with. But I was wrong. The studying of the ocean, the planning of a place to fend off the attack coming from it, it isn't going to be enough. The initial swell of the oncoming tsunami has already covered the smaller areas, and the current of it tugs hard against the ship.

"Captain! You need to get down. It's getting closer. You can't leave us like a sitting duck out here"! Greer calls up, his hands cupped around his mouth to be heard over the growing roar. "What do we do? You need to tell us what to do, we are going to be swallowed by it!"

"Go under with the rest of them," I shout back. "I'll meet you down there."

Ignoring whatever else he tries to say before giving up and following my orders, I turn my attention back to the horizon just as the wall meets the tail end of Quebec's Atlantic point. The tsunami appearing to fold on itself as it does, water pounding over as it rolls onto land. A blue and white mass spreading out, blanketing everything as it appears to only further speed up, flowing over into the bay side and the white sea foam carrying the debris it has picked up while charging forward. Pushing the current even more.

*Not even close to enough*, I think. Releasing my hold on the side of the mast, I slide down, dropping the last few feet on to the deck. My ankles complain at the assault, but I ignore the needle-like pains as I sprint back across the top of the ship.

"Pull them up!" I yell to the two left guarding the anchors. "Hurry. Get those things as high as you can without having them break the surface completely. Let some of it hang!"

They both jump to it. The grating sound of the pullies doing nothing to overpower the noise of the ocean, but it is enough to distract their eyes from the oncoming onslaught in order to focus on manually overriding the anchors. Taking one last look at them, I swallow any words my conscience is trying to convince me of, before turning to run. My hand grabbing the heavy door to below just in time to hang on as the ship gets slammed by the beginning of the first wave. The door gives way to my pull as I hear the yells of the crewmen near the anchors. The loud snap from the chain happens seconds before the screams of one of the men, the other yelling out his name as he tries to help. Greer's hand grips the front of my shirt from inside the doorway, yanking me in and slamming it shut. The lock sliding into place before we both stumble down the stairs. Hands braced on the walls as the ship begins to spin.

Lights flicker in an attempt to stay on before the generator finally gives up. The engine having been turned off in an attempt to let the ship ride it out the best it could. My eyes adjust to the darkness quickly, and I can take in the surroundings of my crew all huddled tight together. Some have tied themselves to posts, while others pressed themselves tightly into doorways and corners. Anywhere they could hold still from the rocking. Covering my head with my hands, I will it as hard as I can that a miracle will happen, that I followed the prophecy description well enough to survive this.

"Come on," I say quietly. Hands clenching at my sides, eyes squeezed tight. "Come on..."

And it is in that moment that I can feel it catch. The remaining anchor left to dangle finally slams into something strong enough to hold it. The entirety of the ship creaking as it lurches, jerking quickly as the chain pulls tight and the ship holds its ground against the berating outside waters.

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### XXV: Ameira

Location: Claybelt Forest, Ontario, Canada.

I don't know what is worse: the twisted understanding of Gedeon's view of the world, or the admiring stares of his followers as he spoke. As if they were listening to their saviour, these people really did believe that they are a part of something important. They believed this man to be some sacred leader, listening to him drone on for the last several minutes about his view of the future, with those around him nodding along and praising his words.

"I don't know what kind of prophecies you have been reading, but most don't speak well of those left behind," Mahd says. "It is not those who are good that remain here."

"If that is true, then tell me something Mahd. Why are you still here? Why is your wife? Your friends? Were you not good people? Do you really believe you deserve to be left behind?"

I can see what Gedeon is trying to do, and a part of me can't help but want to know the answers to those questions. His words hitting our own sore points, questions I have often asked myself when reflecting on everything over the years. Watching every one we love drift into

nothingness before our eyes. Everything Mahd and I grew up reading had promised a better place for those who escaped the dark years before the end, so I always wondered why we never went to.

"Of course, I've wondered, but I know I lived as I should have. Never hurting others, unlike you; we are not the same as you. If we remain here, then there is a reason and I choose to trust it," Mahd replies. However, his fidgeting gives away his nervousness, revealing his own real doubts.

"But what if it already happened? And we are the one's meant to rebuild it all. The ones who are chosen to stay? To do it all right this time?" Gedeon asks, his questions coming out rapidly. Listing bullet points he didn't expect an answer to. "Think about it. Leaders like us, all happening to come together? Ezra and yourself, both individuals who brought together the lost souls that were left here. Just as I have, collecting the group of followers and believers over the span of many years. We were destined to all meet, we must have been. The leaders of the new world; a new world that can be built off of a proper combination of morals, bringing together values from all beliefs. The way that it should have been done the first time."

"Morals?" I explode, reaching my limit. "You and your friends have no morality. Stealing what you want from those who need it most. Ransacking communities and the reserves all across the provinces, taking people as property. Gluttony and greed in its ugliest forms."

"And for the record," Joh interjects. " We didn't come to you. We were brought together on our own, and then dragged here to you kicking and screaming. Literally."

Gedeon opens his mouth to reply but is cut off by yells coming from outside. Several yelling out in panic, shouting instructions in deep voices muffled by the cabin walls.



"What's going on?" Gedeon asks his guards. The few of them getting up to peer out the windows.

I can see figures running around outside when they pull back the curtains. The place looking like mass panic as people gather things, running in and out of frame. An alarm begins to blare throughout the compound, the sound penetrating in from outside and causes the guards to have to shout over each other. Some doing their best to hear updates over the walkie talkies.

Glancing at Joh, I catch his eye, mouthing Pan's name as a question. His shrug confirms that he didn't know either, but if it is, it terrifies me to think what she pulled to make this kind of noise.

The front door is opened and slammed shut again as Roger rushes through. "Gedeon—," he begins.

"Roger! I said don't come back with out her. Where the hell is Chauncey?" His boss asks.

"I tried! I even went to his cabin. The door was locked and no one answered when I knocked. I have no idea where they are, but we have bigger problems right now, something's coming."

"What do you mean something's coming?" Gedeon scoffs, peeking out the curtains again.

"Can't tell, but whatever it is, is moving fast and coming through the main road. It'll be here breaching the front gates soon. We can't get a good look at it, it's too quick," Roger explains in a hurry. "Like a black dust cloud coming at us, and whatever it is, is definitely not human-made."

"Okay, okay," Gedeon begins. Running his hand through his short spikey hair several times, before he takes a deep breath. "You all go and do your best to keep our people calm. Roger, you come with me, we need to get an eye on it. Do not panic, we knew we could be tested, that our community will need to prove ourselves against the evils of the world. This is our test, we will not fail."

"What about us?" Ez demands. Gesturing to our little group gathered off to the side. "Let us go. Focus on what you need to, we can save ourselves!"

Gedeon seems to swat away his interruption with a flippant hand in our direction, not even giving him a glance. "Lock the door after we leave, and don't let anyone in or out," he says to one of the men, before striding out with the others. The locks clicking into place as the guard takes his position outside the front door.

"Dammit," Joh yells. Slapping one of the only lanterns off the table, the glass shattering across the floor as the flame goes out.

"Would you relax?" Ez snaps. "It is dark enough as it is, we don't need to step all over broken glass trying to move around in here."

"Relax? Don't tell me to relax Ez. In fact, don't tell me anything. You've done such a great job of keeping all your little secrets about visions, and dreams, and bullshit, since we met you. We would have been fine. We should have just left you in the rolled truck at the bottom of the stupid quarry!"

"And I should have left you both tied in the back of that Glorie truck," Ez yells back. Taking several steps forward to get in Joh's face. "Then Rick would be alive, the supplies would've been fine, and my people wouldn't have been wiped out!"

Joh uses both hands to shove him back, knocking Ez into the table behind him. The two seeming to instantaneously slam together moments later, fists swinging as both tried their best to land a hit.

"Can you do something, please?" I ask Mahd, eyes wide as I gesture at the two fighting men.

Rolling his eyes in frustration Mahd quickly darts in between them. Shoving his body in as a wedge, his size giving him the advantage against the two smaller men as he separates them. Arms spread wide, one hand gripping the front of each of their shirts.

"Enough," Mahd says, giving the two a shake as he does. "This is solving nothing, turning on each other is a death sentence and we need to stick together."

"He started it," Ez says. Taking deep breaths to calm down, a knot already forming above his brow from one of Joh's hits.

"Because he is scared Ez," I try. Glancing at Joh in time to catch him looking at me, his eyes darting back down to the floor. "Pan's missing, we're locked in here. He has a right to be stressed, but what he doesn't have the right to do, is take it out on the only people trying to help."

Joh nods slowly, his shoulders slumping as he steps back. Mahd releasing his hold on both of them.

"I'm sorry," Joh says to Ez. The other man meeting his eyes, jerking his head in acceptance. "I'm not normally like that, everything is changing and I...I want to find Pan and get out of here."

"I know," Ez replies, voice steady again. "I didn't mean what I said either. I promise we will figure out a way out of here, and—"

"Shh," I interrupt. Finger held up as I motion for them to be quiet, and point towards the front door. "Listen."

A loud thump can be heard outside the front door, followed a soft moan of pain as shuffling noises get louder. The handle of the door beginning to rattle.

We all freeze. Watching the locks on the door spin from the outside as something picked its way in. My heart is in my throat now, hand reaching out to grasp Mahd's. The two others circling in closer as we wait.

The door opens so fast that it slams against the wall of the cabin. Two figures stumbling in, the limp body of the guard outside being dragged in as they carry each end. The closest figure to the door closing it behind them and locking everything back up. Both are wearing Glories coats, but it is not until one removes their hood that we can see who it is.

"Bout time, huh?" Pan asks, dropping the legs of the unconscious guard they took out before opening her arms towards Joh.

"Yea, took you long enough," he says. Striding towards her, he grabs the front of her coat and yanks her in close. Both of them hugging tight.

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XXVI: Pan

Location: Claybelt Forest, Ontario.

"Lovely reunion, truly, but let's hold off on the celebrating until we all somehow make it out of here, yes?"

ReeRee doesn't get a full sentence out before she is also tugged into a relieved embrace, by Ez. Annoyance appearing in her eyes as her arms are pinned to her side before her face is mashed tightly into his chest.

"Finally," he breathes. Arms squeezing tight once before letting go, his hands grasp his shoulders to look his best friend in the eyes. "Do you have any idea how worried I've been? How hard I've been trying to get back here?"

"Yea," she says, shaking off his hands before flashing him a wide smile. "Probably about as hard as it was to wait for you, knew I couldn't leave without seeing if you would make it back."

I can't help but laugh, the banter of my new friends breaking the moment. My arms release Joh before turning to hug Ez quickly, shooting a happy smile at Ameira and Mahd.

"Where have you been?" Joh asks, arms waving. "How did you even manage to ditch that creep? No, you know what. I don't even want to know. Don't tell me. Gosh, I'm just so damn happy to see you."

His smile is huge, eyes bright, looking at me like I am someone incredible. The sinking feeling in my stomach reminds me what my escape cost, and I wonder if he would still look at me the same if he knew about the life I took.

"Yea, it wasn't exactly easy," I say, hesitating a moment. "Once I got away from Chauncey, I had to take my time. I stopped by the med-tent to make sure you were brought back

here. Everyone working in there had freaked out about the sirens and ran out already, so busting her out was easy."

"I'm just relieved she got you out on her way. I had no idea how we were going to free you. Or if they moved you back to wherever it is that they usually keep you, then I'd never find you," Ez says to her.

ReeRee's face bunches with confusion for a moment at his words. Her eyes flicking over to Joh, a questioning look in them as he holds up his hands to show his innocence.

"Hey, I never said a thing. That's all your business, not mine," Joh says. "I didn't sign up to be the messenger for whatever it is you got going on."

"What?" Ez asks, directing it towards ReeRee.

"They keep me in the med-tent because I'm pregnant Ezra."

Silence. The noise from outside taking over as we all stare at her in shock.

"That's impossible," Ameira gasps. Her eyes wide as she looks at ReeRee for any falseness to what she claims. "There haven't been any children for years. I've looked, people in our community were so desperate... but we never found any hope."

"I know, why do you think once Gedeon found out he never left me alone. I only told them because they were moments away from hurting me," ReeRee says. Her hand coming up to run through her hair in frustration. "I have so much to explain—"

"Who's the father?" Ez interrupts. Face tight with anxiousness. "Who? I don't understand, if there was someone I'd know. I was only gone a few days, Mary. This isn't a new secret you kept from me."

The use of her full name hits her hard coming from him, and I can almost see the reprimand like a slap across her face. Eyes sharpening as she glares at Ez.

"Because it is complicated. There isn't one, or I mean, there must be technically but," she breaks off. Helpless in finding the right words. "Look, we don't have the time right now, just know that you weren't the only one having dreams Ez. Why do you think I always told you to keep yours to yourself? They were messages for us only, and I knew that from my own experience."

It is clear from his face that Ez isn't about to let it go, but the sounds from outside are getting louder and the air horn is now letting out one long note. The outside area that I can see through the windows empty.

"So, let's put a quick pause on this," I say. Halting the reply from Ez, and a still curious Ameira. "We need to finish the whole breaking out thing I started, because whatever they are all freaking out about out there, is not something I did. And I don't want to stay here long enough to figure out what it is that has them so scared."

"Agreed," Mahd cuts in. "The man and his followers were talking about something coming down the main road. Best if we avoid that way then. Ez is there another way out that we can take, that will go around the main road? A back way out?"

Nodding at Mahd, Ez appears to switch back into survival mode. Eyes scanning the scene outside the curtains.

"Yeah, we can take one of the less used roads back out in the direction we walked in. We will need to get a vehicle somehow, something with all-wheel drive though or it won't make it

over the terrain. If we can get back to the van even better, it still has all our stuff, and hopefully they never went back further once they found it. It should still be hidden."

I begin to scan over the cabin, motioning to Joh to begin checking the desk drawers and cabinets for anything we might be able to use.

"Jackpot," exclaims Joh. His hand holding up a bunch keyrings. "Found the storage box of keys for, what I'm assuming, is the backlot."

"Grab them all," I say, smiling back at him. "Okay, everyone ready?"

"It'll be a full sprint," Ez starts, as he slowly cracks the door open a few inches. "No point in trying to be discreet now. Let's hope that everyone who would care about us is too wrapped up in whatever is going on. Stay tight together, we move as a group."

"Slowest in front with Ez to set the pace for all of us. No one lags behind," I add. My hands reaching out to grab Joh's and Ameira's. All of us linking together to not get separated as the sky dims even more. A strong hard wind picks up and has the dry earth spinning into small dustclouds, the sound of blowing sand rushes past outside the door. Taking one last look to check that the way is still clear, Ez flings the door open as we all charge out into the growing storm.

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I can hear the hoofbeats before the sandstorm lets me see their owner. The ground thundering beneath my feet as the large black shadowed mass of the horse tears through the campground. The rider on its back is too large to be human, its horse twice that size. Several people flee from it, running past our hiding spot and into the open courtyard; screams of terror as the beast gains on them, its sword swinging low as he aims, the long silver blade slicing through



them with ease as their bodies flash bright for a moment. The victims soon disappearing into thin air with each arching sweep of his weapon.

"Keep moving," shouts Ez from his spot at the front of the group with ReeRee. He had led us behind one of the overturned tables when seeing the Horseman approach. One arm up high to block the dirt from getting into his eyes, Ez bows his head against the wind before pushing forward.

Our group is slow moving but we keep tight to the buildings, slipping along the sides and staying on the edges.

"The people," shouts Ameira. My hand tugging her along. "What's happening to them? We need to help!"

"We can't," I argue. Glancing at Mahd as he flinches at the sounds of more screams, the Horseman finding more victims. "There's nothing we can do, besides they wouldn't have saved us."

Before she can reply, we are moving again. The open vehicle lot coming into sight as we round the corner of a building.

"Keys, keys," yells Ez, hands out towards Joh. The latter reaching into this pocket and pulling out the several sets he had, tossing a few to Ez and the rest of us.

"Everyone span out, try to find a match for it," I say. "Yell if you find something." Darting to the closest row of parked vehicles, I begin trying all the one's that matched the two Ford symbols on the keys I have.

"Come on, come on," I mutter to myself. Tugging the hood down tighter over my head to block the blowing sand from my eyes.

"This key is useless," shouts Mahd from the opposite end of the row. "This truck is rusted out, looks like it's been used for parts."

"Keep looking," I yell back. Silently praying that we didn't hold keys to a bunch of used up vehicles.

Just when the cries of the others come across the lot that they are finding the same issue, one of the keys in my hands slides into the door lock. Turning smoothly, the handle gives into my yank so that I am able slide inside the cab. I rest my head on the steering wheel, sending out a quick plea before spinning the key. The dash lights up in response, giving me hope, but the engine slow to respond; the motor giving a long sluggish turn before I turn the key back off. Giving it a moment to reset before trying again, trying my best not to flood it. My foot revving the pedal as I do. The engine finally responds after a few good cranks, the vehicle sputtering to life before idling loudly. A heavy chugging shaking the cab.

Joh lets out a shout of joy as he opens the passenger side door to slide in, the rest piling into the small back bench seat as Ez squishes in tight to Joh in the front.

"Seatbelts," I say, shoving the truck into gear as I give it a good shot. Lurching us forward, the engine bogs terribly in its old age, but it has us slowly crawling out of the parking spot.

"Head out the opposite way, the back of the lot has one of the exits to the old logging roads." Ez points towards the direction as he leans around Joh to speak. The truck is stiff to turn,

lacking any power steering, but with Joh's help we are able to crank us all the way left before straightening back out and heading down towards the back.

I don't register the sound of another incoming vehicle, barely audible over the wind outside, until I hear ReeRee's shout of warning from her place directly behind me.

I have a split second of recognition to what she said before the front end of the incoming truck slams directly into our side of the vehicle. The impact causing us to spin around, and smash into the row of cars beside us. I can hear ReeRee's cry of pain above the rest of our screams, her door having crumpled under the hit.

Ringings fill my ears as my brain is slow to process that we have stopped moving, the moment slow and dragged out. Dust from the airbags has Joh and Ez coughing hard, but I can see enough to know that any damage they have is minor.

"Mahd, Ameira," I cough out. The two answering quickly that they are okay. "ReeRee?"

"Yeah," she says. Her voice low behind me. "I'm stuck, my leg. I can't get it out." I can feel movement under my seat, as she tries to get herself out, before giving up.

"We need to get out," Ez says. He shoves his shoulder against his side of the door, but our truck is pressed too close to the other vehicles to give him any room.

Before I can try my door, my hand unclicking the seat belt, it is ripped open. Gedeon's sick smile filling my view as he leans at me, and his hands grip the front of my coat as he drags me out. My body twists as I try to pry him off, and I can hear the noise of the rest of my friends piling out behind me.

I feel the cold press of the metal against my temple at the same moment Joh freezes mid-step in his lunge towards us. Eyes wide as his face pales.

"I told you all to stay in the cabin," Gedeon begins in frustration, reprimanding us like children. "And now look, you've forced my hand and I had to resort to this to get you all to listen!" He gestures with his hand holding the gun against my head. The tip twisting back and forth on my skin, causing it to pinch.

"It's over Gedeon," Ameira says. Her hands up in front of her in an attempt to talk him down. "Let her go, let *us* go. Focus on your own people, whatever ones are still left. You can't take all of us, and you know you don't want to hurt her, you want us to stay too much."

He scoffs loudly, head shaking at Ameira. "It's not over, it is only the beginning of everything we will all raise together."

"Enough already with this crap you keep spouting," Mahd snaps. An angry hard tint to his eyes, the look foreign on his normally kind face. "What about this makes you think that? Look around you, this earth is dying, all its life is disappearing, and so will we if we don't let us go, before whatever that beast is realizes he missed a few and circles back!"

As if the mention of the Horseman summons him, the large figure trots out from the end of one of the rows near the camp. The distance is too far for a close look when it turns towards us, but it is clear it stares at us. Its head turning to scan all of us all with the face encroached in darkness; a wide hood like a black gaping mouth hid the true individual within. The armour on the horse clanks as it shifts anxiously from side to side, waiting for instruction.

"Either shoot me, or let us go, Gedeon. Or we all die," I say. My eyes locked on the Horseman.

Appearing to finally really address the situation he is in, Gedeon releases me with an aggravated shove. Ameira and Joh steady me as I am tossed forwards.

"You do not need to fear it," he screams, gesturing to the Horseman slowly approaching. Gedeon turns towards him, arms spread wide as he yells towards it. "I do not fear your final judgement. Some of those I collected may have failed, but I will not!" The Horseman is charging towards him now, Gedeon standing open chest. Like he believes himself to be a self-less martyr, and not a madman.

Working quickly, we begin to help pry on the back of the seat ReeRee's leg is still stuck behind. The woman having to witness everything from the broken truck window as she did her best to try and pull herself from where it is stuck. Her form quickly crawling through the front and out the driver's door once she is able to rip it free. Ez helps her down as she leans heavily on him, her pant leg a deep red from her knee down. The hand clutching her side hinting that she may have broken a few ribs.

The Horseman is feet from Gedeon now, the man tilting his head back with a serene smile. Confident. The expression remaining, even when the rider does not pause to swing his arching blade, slicing up through Gedeon's chest as his form burst into a nothingness. Just like all the others.

Mahd and Ez clasp hands to pick up ReeRee, and she throws her arms around their shoulders. The group of us sprinting towards what is left of the sparse treeline, but ReeRee's cries of pain force us to stop, the two dropping her down lightly as she gasps.

"I can't, it hurts," she says. Gripping her side and putting all her weight on her good leg. "You all go, I'll distract him as long as I can."

"Don't be ridiculous," Ez snaps. He bends down to try and pick her up again, but she shoves him off. "I'm not leaving you to die!"

"I won't," she replies. Her face very calm, hand coming up to rest on his shoulder before squeezing it tight once. "I am not afraid of where the taken go. My dreams held promises Ez, not warnings. I don't fear my judgement, it has already come and gone."

"No," Ez murmurs. Shaking his head, eyes focused on hers as his fill with tears. "There is absolutely no way I am leaving you."

I want to tell her no, to grab her with Ez and force her to come, but I can see how pale her face is. The shakiness of her voice. Her odds of healing okay are already low in a landscape like this, let alone her condition with the baby.

"Ez..." I start.

"Don't. No," he cuts me off. He reaches for ReeRee again, trying to grab her but she shoves him hard this time.

"Dammit Ezra," she says, eyes blazing as she does her best to pull herself tall. "I won't make it and you know it. I will only slow you down. And even if we did somehow outrun that thing, what kind of life am I promising this baby here? There are what, days left? Hours, maybe? Before survival here becomes impossible... I don't want that life Ez, I want the one promised in my dreams."

Joh grasps Ez's shoulder, holding tight as he tried to fight him off to follow ReeRee. The woman giving Ez one last look, her eyes taking him in, scanning him over like a snapshot with a

sad smile on her face before she turns towards the Horseman. The rider having slowed, listening to us, sword hanging at its side.

"Go," she says again. This time stronger, refusing to turn around.

Mahd is helping to hold Ez back now, his screams for ReeRee to stop ripping painfully from his throat. Ameira's face streams with tears as she watches the scene unfold in front of her, grief across all of our features knowing there is nothing we could do to help.

The last image we see of ReeRee is the Horseman studying her, before his one large hand comes down to greet her. His fingers stroking the top of her head gently as her form fades away into the blowing winds.

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We've been running too long. The pain in my side is now a shooting cramp that rolls across my front with every deep breath I try to pull in. I can hear the gasping of the others, but I don't know if the Horseman followed or not. The dust storm winds that still push at our backs is enough to keep up moving, however our plan to find our way back to where we left our old van is impossible now. The landscape all looked the same, broken dried pieces of forest that littered the ground. The long-beaten logging road finally comes into view in front of us as we sprint up the side embankment. Potholes and large cracks cover the road but it is still easier to run on than through the bumpy forest floor, allowing us to begin picking up a good stride.

The rapid blaring of a car horn behind me makes me stumble, my ankle twisting sharply as I catch myself. The group diving towards the side of the road as a black SUV comes screeching to a stop.

The driver's window rolls down before we have any time to react. A face of a young woman sticks out, blowing her chin length hair out of her face as she rolls her eyes at our frozen expressions.

"Get in," she demands, gesturing to the vehicle. Acting like she is confused as to why we still hadn't moved.

"And who are you?!" accuses Joh.

Disregarding him, she looks at me with a hard stare. Eyes burning into mine before speaking.

"There comes a time when you need to take a chance, to find out if you can trust someone," she begins, speaking fast. "I understand I'm asking it of you too soon, but if there is anyone on this earth that you can trust right now. It is me."

Something about her has me trusting what she says, my feet taking several steps towards the vehicle before realizing.

"Pan, what? No." Joh says, grabbing my shoulder.

"After everything we can't just trust people," cuts in Mahd. Ameira giving me a long look before shrugging to say she is just as unsure. I didn't know either, but not a lot of other options were presenting themselves.

"Not to rush you all along, but time is of the essence here," the girl says. Motioning behind us.

The Horseman is down the road, his figure moving fast towards us. The wind picking up even worse than before, the pattering of small stones dinging against the back of the SUV.



"On second thought, everyone get in," Joh says. All of us rushing to open the doors, slamming them in rapid succession.

The tires spin the moment we get inside, the SUV turning in a tight circle before taking off down the road in the opposite direction of the chasing rider.

"Faster," I say. Having slid up front into the passenger seat, I keep my eyes locked on the rear-view mirror.

"I push any harder on this gas pedal and my foot is going straight through this floor," she snaps. The engine is already screaming, clearly being pushed to its limits and her hands grip the steering wheel as she tries keep us on the road. The vehicle bouncing hard along the crevices.

"He's gaining on us," shouts Joh from his spot in the far back with Ez. Their two faces pressed against the back window. Mahd and Ameira sit anxiously between all of us, forms tight together.

"What do we do—"

A loud sound bursts out. The high-pitched call forcing us to slam our hands over our ears. Cries of pain release from everyone as our SUV skids to a stop, its driver keeled over the steering wheel. Fingers pushing hard into her ears trying to block it out. The sound is like a long trumpet call, its tone shaking through me and making my body feel like a tuning fork. My eyes roll into my head when I try to look back at the others, before being forced to give up and squint them tight against the pain.

It stops as randomly as it started. The note cutting off, tossing us all back into what feels like a dead silence before the low idling of the SUV fills my ears. My chest heaves as my body stops its rush of adrenaline, and my eyes blink to get rid of the floating black spots.

"I thought she let go,...I thought she just let go!"

Mahd is screaming, his voice starting off low before breaking into full hysterics. Spinning around I can see him sitting there, hand out still, fingers trying to grasp something.

"I felt her hand,...she....I didn't let go. I didn't let go," his voice breaks. Sorrow ripping across his face as we all stare at the now empty seat next to him, Ameira nowhere to be seen.

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## XXVII: Ez

### Location: Northern Ontario / Quebec Border

The rest of the ride is mostly silent. Hours pass as we are driven further out of the logging roads and back to travelling down the old main highways. Heading East, towards Quebec. Our driver told us West wasn't possible. Apparently, the Prairies are on fire now, the dry flat landscape like miles of beds of burning coals. Fires rolling across the Country.

Mahd is eerily quiet, having shut down after the realization hit that Ameira really is gone. So is the Horseman. The road behind us empty after the loud call. Wind gone. As if the trumpet called it away. Pan did her best to console Mahd, moving into the back and allowing me to take the front. Unfortunately, it didn't do much to help. A broken look had overtaken his face, now he sat staring straight ahead, eyes seeing nothing as his mind is lost in memories of somewhere else.

Whatever the call was must have been another type of cleanse, but the fact that I hadn't received a vision for this one worried me. It made it feel like the beginning to something else.

"We're almost at a spot to camp for the night," our driver breaks in to my reveries. "I can't keep driving, I'm getting too tired and if there was anyone left wanting to chase you, we would have lost them hours ago.

She had introduced herself as Mai once everything calmed down. Not giving anything more than that, only a promise to take us somewhere safe, where we can collect our thoughts.

The rest stop off the highway was clearly once beautiful. The parking area secluded, laid out in front of a flowing river bed with paths through long grass down to the water's edge. Now all that is left is a dried marked-out area of what had been, my imagination filling in the blue in the empty canal of the streams, and covering the empty skeletal branches in dark green needles.

"Any of the firepits will work, we can move the picnic tables if need be," Pan says. She had hopped out of the vehicle already, beginning to gather sticks as Joh got to clearing around one of the firepits.

"Small fire only, just to keep warm," Mai adds as she joins her. "I doubt anyone or thing is close, but in this darkness we will already look like a beacon for miles."

It didn't take long before we are able to finally settle down, all of us taking a seat at the tables we have surrounded our fire with. Mahd had stayed silent since leaving the vehicle, sitting stone-faced now as he stares intently at the flames.

"Think now is finally a good time to hear those explanations you said were pending," I say to Mai. Her dark eyes meeting mine across the fire.

"Yah, what a coincidence." Joh starts, staring at me. "I was just about to say the same thing. To you. Assuming you haven't forgotten your old promise."

I know he's right, that I still haven't told them about my visions, the fact clearly still a bright point in their minds. Pan also looks at me from her spot beside him. Questioning. Waiting.

"I know. You're right," I begin, before being quickly cut off by Mahd. His voice startling, unexpected after his long silence.

"We all have secrets," he says. Eyes locked on the fire still. "Moments that we hide, ones that didn't make sense—at least at first. We saw things we deny seeing. It's time we start being honest. Including you, Joh." He levels the man with a hard stare. Joh's eyes widening as Pan looks back and forth between the two.

"I don't know what—"

"Please don't insult me, okay?" Mahd snaps. "I saw you while we were in the c-can. Fiddling constantly with that thing in your pocket. It wasn't until you slipped it out quickly that I realized what it was. A USB. So, now you tell me, why would something so insignificant to a reality like ours, be the one thing you make sure to keep with you?"

Joh has all our attention now. His face hardening, turning red as he actively avoided his best friend's eyes.

"Johnathon," Pan snaps, causing him to finally give in.

"I went back in," he says, pausing to pull the USB out of his pocket. "When I went home before we left town, I didn't just grab the stuff we needed. It's why it had taken me so long. I had

to know what he knew, or know if he knew anything at all. I had hidden everything for so long, and I didn't know if we would ever come back..."

"You went into your dad's office?" Pan asks, eyes wide. "But it was sealed?"

"Yeah well, it wasn't exactly the easiest to break into, but it was worth it. I didn't only go through his office, I checked the lab too. It is where I found this," he says, twirling the USB between his fingers. "The generator was still going enough for me to power up a computer and transfer as much of his files onto this that I could."

"Files containing what exactly?" I ask, leaning forward.

"About this. Everything going on. My dad may have disappeared in the first cleanse, but he has been studying it long before that, tracking it," Joh explains. "Pan your dad too, all those times they would stay up late, staring at the sky. Tracking world changes. They were studying what was coming, and I am assuming, so were the people my dad worked for."

"Studying what? People have tried for years to track the cleanses, or explain them," Pan replies, brows furrowed. "You're saying your dad just knew this the whole time?"

"Him, and whoever he was working with, but he didn't only study the physical changes, the readable ones through science; it is a combination of those changes and the prophecies of the world. It's why so many could not figure it out at first. Science disregards religion and myth, and the latter does the same to the former. The groups refuse to see each other's side, so it was never brought into their studies. And for those who did include prophetic scripture, they didn't have the entire picture."

"What do you mean the entire picture?" Pan asks. "Chauncey was spouting off about something that sounded like that before I was able to escape, but I figured it was mostly nonsense."

"My dad enforced one thing repeatedly in his notes, he wrote it over and over. The scriptures, the myths, the written words studied, are all a puzzle. They are all sections of the same piece, forewarning what was coming. All holding different parts of one big story."

"And so what, you've just known this all along? Ever since we left home?"

Pan's hurt is obvious, her face scrunching up in confusion.

"No. I mean yes, technically, but I only scanned the first bit, and what was I meant to say? *'Oh hey Pan, look here is a USB. Full of potential answers—or most likely more questions—but it is completely useless to you because the entire world fell to crap, and we will probably never be near a computer again, but I took it just in case,'*" He pauses with a snort, the sarcasm laced heavily in his words. "I don't understand why I even still have the thing, but I felt like I couldn't tell you if I didn't find a way to show you. Besides, be happy, I saved you the anxiety that has been my past few weeks. Ignorance really is bliss."

Everyone is silent after his outburst, knowing he is right. Already I have questions, my mind spinning with the fact that the answers were sitting in front of me on an USB that none of us could access. It's infuriating.

"I understand," Pan says after a few moments. "I want to find out more, and obviously I am not letting this go, you know that, but I get why you didn't tell me. What use is stressing over the *why* anyway, it already happened. Anything your dad discovered has probably come to fruition by now."

"See, I would agree with you Pancake," Joh says, laying the childhood nickname on thick in his attempt to suck up for keeping secrets. "But then I was able to witness a bit of Ez's sleep-talk during one of those last cleanses. Ignoring the extremely creepy voice that accompanied it, the warning you said, I have heard it before. Verbatim actually."

"What warning?" I ask. Confusion filling me at what he seems to be getting at. "If it happened during my seizure, I tend to have no recollection of what my body does during it."

"Cut the crap Ez, they aren't seizures. Not in the traditional sense anyway, and you know that. They're visions, and judging off what prophecy you let out, it wasn't the first one was it? The sixth, or seventh, maybe?" Joh shoots off. He is standing now, pacing in front of the fire as he speaks.

I can feel my body go cold, mouth drying out as I lick my lips before replying. "How do you know that?"

"Because I know them. I had them too. Or a version of them. Except my seven-year-old self called them nightmares," he says. "I didn't make the connection at first, the search in my dad's office reminded me of them initially. Flashes of him grilling me on the details during the nights I woke up screaming, but it was not until that one vision that you had Ez, talking about judgement, that it all flooded back. It was the same voice from when I was a kid."

All I can do is stare at him, a part of me sick at how I am filled with relief that it wasn't only me connected to all of this, but another part knows that it means the visions really do hold truth.

"They've stopped," I reply. Swallowing down the lump that has formed in my throat. "I haven't had one since then, and I still have no idea what it means. So, if you're hoping for answers as to what happened earlier with that noise, I can't help you."

"Mine either," Joh says. "I mean, like in my nightmares, there was never that trumpet sound."

The fire crackles as Mahd drops more logs onto it, prodding the pieces and stirring up sparks before looking up at us. Eyes glinting in the orange light. Catching my eye as I jerk my chin, urging him to speak up. His answer coming in a deep sigh before addressing the others.

"I didn't have the same as you both, the dreams or visions anyways. At least in the way that you make them sound," he says, before sitting back down at one of the tables. "But I did dream of you. All of you. Mostly shadowed glimpses, starting with individuals I needed to help find. To bring together, those lost and needing us. I dreamt of them, and Ameira would build their trust in us..., she was always so good at that, connecting with others. Then, they slowed down for a while as we rebuilt, until I began seeing Ez and his groups. Snapshots of the struggles he was having with the visions."

"Which is when you left to find us," I finish for him.

"Yes. Once I narrowed down a way to contact you, I was able to get directions and begin planning," he continues. "Ameira discovered my plans, of course, and surprised me on my way out. I had only wanted to leave her in a place I knew was safe. A part of me wonders if it would have changed her fate if she was home, that if I had only pushed back a little more, maybe I could have convinced her to stay there." His voice trails off, eyes glistening as he twists his hands together anxiously.



"She didn't exactly seem like someone to agree to stay behind," Pan says softly.

"Especially if it meant you going into something dangerous alone."

"Plus, it wouldn't have mattered," Mai cuts in. Her voice surprising me for a moment, forgetting about the new addition to our group. "Her coming with you or not. This sort of thing doesn't really care much about distance or place."

She had stayed quiet during our discussions, sitting still and perceiving us under a judgement-less gaze, waiting for us to piece together everything she apparently already knew.

"Your father was right," she begins, addressing Joh. "It really comes down to the prophecies of what our society has come to classify as religious. My family studied it as well, the changes. My mother worked as an arborist. She had been studying the landscape for northern Alberta for years, and noticed changes early on; her team was tracking the snow patterns and forest growth, along with a group of others. They logged tons of data for years, but no one was listening. Combine that with my father, the Historian, and it didn't take long for them to start finding the thread that needed to be pulled."

"So, you're saying that there is no such thing? That religion and spirituality aren't actually true?" I ask. The thought bringing an uncomfortable feeling in my chest.

"No," she says. "Not at all, I'm saying the exact opposite. What I'm getting at is the fact that society has been so focused on this question of whether or not there exists this higher power—this ultimate explanation—and if so, which group has it right. But what they are not realizing, is that they are missing the flip side to that question. The other side of the coin. Not just, what if they are all *wrong*, but what if they are all *right*."

"It's possible," Mahd says. Watching the girl across from him. "They are not that different at the core. Built on understandings of respect and love, for others and the planet, but I wouldn't say they are the same."

"You are misunderstanding me," Mai replies. "I am not saying *all right* in a sense of sameness, but in the existence of all religions, all afterlives, all forces. I agree that the ethical and moral values align within the writings, but I am focusing more on the warnings given. It is as if each heard a version of the same end. Detailing the cleansing, terror and famine, overtaking of evil spreading; how everything comes in sevens, the number carrying throughout all the prophecies in all religions and mythology when it comes to apocalyptic narrative. All of it, is playing out as true. Like your visions, there were seven, right? Matching the seven cleanses? The seven burning red suns before all light is stolen?"

"Okay, okay," I cut in. Wanting to stop her rant. "I understand, in fact, let's say I almost believe you. What good is all this to us now? Sounds to me like now it is just down to waiting it out until we disappear with the rest. It still doesn't explain how you knew where to find us. My home's location wasn't exactly broadcasted to everyone."

"It is not that I knew where your place was. I just knew I was being drawn to you, had to give in to it, and just trust I knew where to lead myself for the answers I sought. Following my gut, trusting my instincts. Something I had to do a lot of since my parents disappeared." She pauses for a moment, caught up in old memories before shaking it off. "I spent pretty much every year since then trying to track down as much information as I could. Hitting up, not just my mom's old contacts but, my dad's friends at a lot of the archives. I was even able to bribe my way on to one of the few airplanes still flying shipments overseas. Got through some contacts in UK, and travelled as much as I could over there. Unfortunately, by the time I tried to make it

back, the plane contact fell through and I had to spend a few weeks on trade ship back over here. I only landed on the North American continent only a few days before the cleanses started again."

"Was anything much better over there?" I ask. Curious to know how the rest of the world was since contact only dwindled over the years.

"The same, if not worse. A lot of the railway systems over there were down, the more remote communities definitely took a hit. The cities all shells of what they once were," Mai explains. "But worth the trip, I have been piecing together all the scriptures I could get my hands on, putting together their various stories. I could only get so much information, depending on what texts have always been made public, unless I went about it in a way that stole knowledge that wasn't mine to know. I came across some other souls in search of the same answers as me, but they had no respect for the cultures that they infiltrated for them. Especially one of the men I caught my ride back to North America with. I had started working with him out of convenience, he always had the best trade connections, and it was obvious that for the most part we shared the same interests of wanting to find out what was happening everywhere. I caught him one night, him and a few of his crew with one of the guards in the old archives we were searching through. He had been kind enough to let us into the main section that was meant to be closed, but apparently that wasn't enough for Kol. He wanted into the private chambers that housed the really ancient texts, the ones kept in sealed off rooms, their pages hundreds of years old. I tried to tell him that we had enough information with what I found..."

Her voice trails off for a moment as she flinches at old memories before continuing. "But when I returned from my search, I walked in on him attempting to stuff the guard's bloody unconscious body into a storage closet and the stolen keys clenched in his hand. The others with

him were cleaning up the mess behind him as if it was a normal occurrence. I told him I was done after that, that I wasn't going to help him find out anything else, and to just give me the ride back over that he promised me. I almost didn't think he would keep his word, but he owed me for all the places I got him into and he knew it. But that's not what matters right now, what matters is that according to what I was able to read, all of this is close to finishing. That trumpet we heard earlier was like the bartender shouting out last call. It is all going to come to a close now."

"What about us? What now?" I say, voicing something I assume everyone else is feeling.

Mai just shrugs, hands open. "Beats me. I found the details on how it ends, what happens to those still here—or even why we are still here—is a mystery to me. Honestly, I am open to suggestions. Traveling alone for so long, I have exhausted my own mind for resources."

Before I can answer the hair on my arms begins to raise. Ears popping, causing me to flinch. Pan jumping along with me, having felt the same thing. Her hand coming up to rub at her ear in annoyance.

"Do you—"

This time a bright light pulses at the horizon for a brief moment. Lighting up the sky as the trumpet call blares again. Louder this time, the sound instantly shattering the windows of the SUV. Luckily this one appeared more like a short blast, enough to knock us off our seats, before stopping abruptly. Disappearing as fast as the flash of light.

Joh lets out a hiss of pain as he stands, harshly patting the dirt off himself, as he straightens. "Any idea why those keep happening?" he asks. Clearly annoyed. "Or when another one is coming?"

"When? No." Mai says, grabbing the few things from the front seat of the SUV. Shaking off the pieces of glass. "But I do know there will be more. That is two so far, and from the pattern of everything I have been enlightened on, that leaves five more."

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My body complains when I crawl out of my makeshift bed the next morning. Having bunched myself into the back of the vehicle, awkwardly propping myself up against the empty back window frame with the others filling the seats in front of me.

It had been a few hours of what felt like very little actual sleep. My mind still constantly snapping me awake as it tries getting over the last few days of panic. The group of us were awoken once during the night when another trumpet call hit, this one short and loud like the last. The sound of it having us all springing up out of our makeshift beds.

Only Joh remains sleeping, the rest of us having already piled out. His head back and mouth open as a deep snore reverberates through his body. Mahd and Mai surround the smoldering fire outside, trying to poke it back to life, as the wandering form of Pan disappears off to the left in her search of more usable wood.

"Not that there is much of a point anymore," I start, heading over to the fire. "But does anyone have a clue to what the time is?"

"A little past 8 a.m I'd say. It can't have been more than five or six hours since we all called it in," Mai says. "To be honest, I didn't sleep much. Any ideas as to what our plans are now? Your camp was all of our destinations, I didn't plan much for after that. And as far as I know, neither had anyone else."

I do my best to ignore the riptide of guilt that I feel. Knowing that besides Mai, I had encouraged all of these people with me to go to my place, and now we are all in a lot worse condition, with a lot less options than we started out with.

"I don't know...it was my only plan too," I say. My shoulders moving as I shrug helplessly. "There is no plan B, I hadn't really imagined it could all just be taken away again, so easily."

"Well, it's pretty much come down to us having to choose the lesser evil. There is not much left of the West, or at least the middle provinces. The coast near Vancouver may have been able to avoid most of it, if it was contained by the Rockies. Anything far past the U.S border has long since been burnt away. I was dropped off by that old trade ship contact in New Jersey when I came back over. I almost didn't make it back up here to Canada because the landscape was getting so bad, and it is only spreading more north as everywhere gets hotter.

"The Canadian east coast was handling it well before we had to leave," Mahd chimes in. "We could head out towards the Atlantic, see if any of my community is still standing. If it gets bad, we can head North as far as possible."

It seemed like the best approach, but the idea of us running around and jumping from last resort to last resort, made me nervous. All it sounds like is backing ourselves into a corner intentionally. As we all fall silent, I become aware of the fact that Pan still hasn't come back. A spark of worry flickering to life as I also clue in to the low buzzing beginning in my ears. The only warning before the loud trumpet blast is heard again. The sound rolling across the landscape with a deep note, rattling my teeth as I flinch against it before it fades.

Joh's form tumbles out of the back seat, foot catching in the seatbelt loop as he falls forward. Hands saving him from a face plant.

"Is everyone good?" He yells out, voice still laced with sleepy confusion as he quickly gets up. "Roll call it."

"Relax, everything is fine," Mai says, chuckling at his antics.

But it wasn't. We weren't all here when it hit. My lungs release my breath like I just took a blow to the chest. "Pan," I say breathless. Eyes snapping towards the sparse treeline. "She was getting wood, wanted to just take a look around."

Mai's shout of reassurance goes ignored as Joh bolts towards where I am pointing. My feet quickly following as we both sprint into the dried trees.

"Pan!" screams Joh as he runs. Twigs snapping loudly as he charges deeper inwards. Yelling her name, I chase after Joh. The tightness in my chest getting worse the longer she doesn't answer us.

It is not until Joh pauses for moment that I can hear a voice calling. Coming from the top of the ravine. Our feet sliding, causing little avalanches of dirt as we scaled up the side.

"Do you, have any idea... going to actually kill me one day with your solo adventures, you know that?" Joh gasps. His hands shaking Pan's shoulders roughly. "I am too damn young to be taken out by a heart attack."

She laughs as he finally releases her. "I'm sorry! How was I supposed to know another one was gonna hit?"

"Going to," Joh corrects out of habit before continuing. "But no more wandering off, I thought you disappeared."

"You were meant to get sticks, and come back," I add in. My adrenaline finally calming down. "Sticks, and back, Pan."

"I know, but I wanted to try and get a higher advantage point. Check if there is anything worth seeing, maybe something useful," she explains. "Then the trumpet hit and you were screaming my name like a lunatic before I could do anything else."

Finding our way back to camp is easy, the panicked search for her having felt a lot longer than it really was. Mahd's face showing relief at the sight of Pan, before returning to his conversation with Mai. A pained look on his face.

"Finally," Mai calls, getting up from her spot at the firepit. "We need to get going. We have stayed in one place long enough."

"Well gee, sorry Pan being MIA took priority for a moment," Joh snaps at her. Taking insult over her lack of care for his best friend.

"And I told you, the cleanse is over now. The trumpet calls of a new stage to the end," Mai replies. "From what I learned, the taking of souls is done. Pan wasn't at risk of disappearing, and before you ask, no I don't know why we are still here." She takes off in a huff to the SUV, not leaving us an opening for any more questions.

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XXVI: Pan

Location: Near Hudson Bay, Ontario, Canada

It's a few hours into our journey now. Joh and I sprawled on the two seats playing cards, with Mahd commenting from his spot in the back. The SUV moving along the main roads. Passing up north in Ontario, heading out East.

Cresting over the large hill, the vehicle rolls to an abrupt top. Mai letting out a low whistle followed by a loud gasp from Ez, drawing all our attention. The road ahead of us is filled with debris. Piles of it as if something had pushed it all together, like a broom sweeping everything up. Water lies pooled in low areas, looking like drying puddles after a heavy rain but there had been none.

"What is this?" I ask. My eyes looking at the landscape around us in shock. "This all can't still be left over from before? There is no way. This is fresh."

"How far away is the nearest body of water? This doesn't make any sense, we are miles from anywhere large. Even if there was a type of flooding, it couldn't do this," Joh chimes in. Leaning over my shoulder as we squish between the two front seats to see out the windshield.

"Would had to have been one heck of a flood," adds Mahd. Shaking his head in disbelief at all the wreckage.

"Well either way, it doesn't really matter, does it," Mai says. Easing her foot off the brake. "Only way we have is through, definitely can't risk heading backwards. Besides, I would rather swim than burn."

I let out a snort of laughter at her bluntness, an aspect I am beginning to really admire.

The SUV went slow at first, making our way around the rolled over vehicles that are piled in with random fallen trees and pieces of what looked like broken homes. We pick up speed again once we pass most of what covered the roads, the landscape outside the vehicle changing further out. The outside world turning from that of a dry desert place to one that has been ravaged by water. Many of the homes we pass torn open to show inside. Water still drips from the frames, and old sewer systems flow fast beneath us with water bubbling up through the man-holes.

"Are we sure there wasn't a storm?" Ez asks, surveying it all. "Maybe we were just too far away or—"

"And what? It all came down with enough force to do this kind of sweeping damage? This looks worse than a hurricane, a rainstorm can't do all this," I reply. "If we were closer to the ocean, I would say tsunami, but there is no way...right?"

"Hudson Bay is big, the biggest near here anyway...but I don't think that it could flood enough to do something like that," Mai says. She points to the unfolded map on the dash in front of her, tapping the large blue image of the bay. "Another hour or so, and we should be close enough to get a look at it. Settling near a place like that may be our best chance for right now anyway. Where there is water, there can grow life. And we desperately need food."

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I can tell we are getting close to the Hudson Bay area. The landscape around us is showing more and more destruction, the further we drive in. It is clear now that whatever had ripped through here was not a storm, but a force of water that rolled across the provinces. Most

neighborhoods have been flattened, only showing sparse skeletons of what they use to be, and any trees and plant life left existing was ripped up and taken with the strength of the water.

It takes a moment for my eyes to actually register what it is they are seeing. The hull of the back of the ship appearing first around the end in the road. The large propellers high in the air as the rear of it sits on top of a rocky shoulder. The entire thing tilted downwards, with the nose touching the ground. The masts on it are broken, now just white sheets that dangle, torn and dirty.

The scene is surreal, enforcing the feeling of this world now being so out of place, that a large fishing barge lays alongside a city street near the harbour of Hudson Bay; but it is not just the sight of the ship that has me shouting at Mai to stop and for the others to take closer notice. My finger pointing at it, as I tap fast on the glass.

"Is that a ship?" Joh' asks in shock.

"Not just a ship," I say. Squinting my eyes to make sure I am seeing it right, before continuing. "There are people. There are people on it."

The figures are hard to spot from where are stopped on the road, but several of them can be seen coming in and out of one of the loading ports. Some on the top deck bracing themselves against the incline as the move up and down it.

"What do we do?" Mahd questions, peering out the window. "We can't be sure if they are friendly without getting closer."

"Then we get closer," I say. "It is worth the risk, we can't keep driving with this low of gas and no destination. Plus, no food."

The others murmur their agreement and Mai cranks the wheel as she shifts the SUV into all-wheel drive. Slowly easing us down into the side ditch, before she crawls the vehicle up and out the other side. The tires creep over the bumpy landscape, spinning slightly in the mud from all the water as we approach the ship.

The figures retreat back inside as we get closer. Disappearing into the dark opening made in the side of the hull of the ship. The edges of it sharp and broken, someone having cut them an easy access door now that the ship is trapped on land. The height and size of it immense in comparison to everything else around.

Getting out of the SUV along with the others, I tilt my head back. Looking up at the worn side of the ship. The top of it too high to see from this angle.

"Welcome!" A deep voice calls, the figure walking down the makeshift ramp from the opening. He looks to be in his mid-twenties, his body long and lean, draped in jeans and a worn-out hoodie with a blue flannel jacket on top. His steel-toe boots thump loudly as he comes to greet us. A few others filing out the opening behind him. "My apologies on my crew running off the minute you showed up. They aren't too sure about you, wanted to grab me first. Can never be too careful, y'know?" His smile reaches his eyes as he stares at me, still having yet to address the others.

"I'm Kol, the captain." He sticks his hand out offering it to me. His long fingers enveloping mine as he shakes it, a shock of warmth radiating up my arm.

"Pan," I reply back. Breaking his hold on my hand when I hear Joh clear his throat loudly in annoyance. "And these are my friends," I continue. Rattling off introductions, I discreetly shoot Joh a glare to challenge his judgemental one.

Kol nods his head at each of them, but doesn't offer his hand. Eyes lingering on Mai's before a smirk overtakes his face. "Well, well, well, little Miss Mai. Lovely to see you again. Small world?" He says, keeping his gaze locked on me as he speaks to her.

Dragging my eyes from his to Mai's, I catch the look of disgust plastered across it. "Kol," she acknowledges. Lips pressed into a thin line. "Can't say I haven't been hoping karma finally took you out."

Kol releases a loud laugh. Grabbing his chest as his head is tossed back.

"Nope, not yet. Still a bit of a spitfire I see," he shoots back. The others chuckling behind him. "Going to have to wish a bit harder than that to take me out unfortunately. Say, how was that harbour we dropped you back off at anyway?"

"Miles from where you promised, and in the middle of a burning hellscape, but I am sure you knew that," she bites back.

"Oh relax," he says. "No sense in re-opening old wounds with a he-said-she-said. Please come inside, you all must be so tired. I bet it has been a while since you've had anything decent to eat."

Kol and his crew turn back up the ramp. Making it clear that he expected us to follow him. The invitation coming off more like a demand.

Glancing at Mai, I jerk my head towards the retreating group. Silently asking her what we should do. She knows this group, not us. And from their exchange, their time together wasn't great.

"Fine, we can go. He is a jerk, can't be trusted when it comes to anything he finds value in," she starts. "But overall, he is not a completely terrible person. Just extremely into self-preservation, so watch your backs."

Shooting a reassuring glance at Joh as he shakes his head at me, letting me know that he didn't think it is a good idea.

"We don't have any other option Joh," I murmur to him. "Stay close, first sign of anything and we will leave. Even if it is just us, we will go, I promise."

"You sure you will be able to tear yourself away from your new lover?" he replies, cracking a smile at the look on my face.

"Oh wow, hilarious. Real comedian," I say. Awkwardly avoiding the question as I stride away from him and towards the others.

The inside of the ship seems untouched by whatever had happened. Pieces of torn cloth tied to various items on the sides of the hall acting like guides to hold. Helping to ease some of the strain of the ships incline.

Kol lead us upwards, towards the end of the ship. The muscles in my arms straining as I move along, shifting from handhold to handhold. I can hear Joh behind me, his muddy sneakers slipping on the floor as he curses trying to follow.

"Communal area has been set up on the upper deck. We were able to elevate some space, like a stage. Gives a spot to sit and eat without worrying about your food sliding into your lap," Kol laughs. Pausing to point to a ladder leading up. "You all can head there with Greer if you

want. Grab some of whatever it is they are serving, been doing what we can with what little we have."

"You mean what little you stole," Mai scoffs, folding her arms.

"It's great," I interrupt. Giving her a look. "Thank you, anything helps. We will absolutely take you up on that."

"Actually, I am hoping you may have a few moments," Kol says to me. "Let the others go on and eat of course, we will meet up with them soon. I only want to steal you away for a little."

I can see the hesitation in the others, Ez and Joh looking as if they are about to object.

"Uhm, sure," I reply. Giving a reassuring smile to the others. "Only a few minutes. Joh save me a space; I won't be more than 10 to 15 minutes top."

"You do you," he says, voice hard as he turns to climb up. Ez following. Joh's anger at the idea of me leaving is clear, but the small nod he slips in confirms he has picked up on my hint. That if I wasn't back in that time frame, to grab the others and come looking.

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It didn't take long before Kol is directing me into a mid-sized cabin. A table and chairs against a wall, along with a small bed.

"Come in, find a seat best you can," he says. Closing the door behind us and flashing a smile that has the blood rushing to my face.

"If I do, will you finally get to the point?" I laugh, flashing him a wide smile but my hard eyes reveal the impatience I feel. Wanting to figure out what I can before Joh gets anxious and comes looking.

Kol lets out a bark-like laugh, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"See, this is why I like you so much Pan. You're incredibly intriguing to me," Kol says, taking a seat across from where I am.

"You don't know me," I reply. Looking around the room taking in as much about him as possible. The cabin riddled with random pages and books.

"But I do, at least in a way I do. You and I are so much alike," he says. "Much more in common than you have with those friends of yours."

"Doubtful," I scoff. Eyes rolling.

"It's true. You and I come from similar paths, and I don't mean the childhood you spent growing up in Manitoba," he argues. "I mean deeper than that, down to the very fabric of our soul's creation."

I have never been good at hiding my expression, the one on my face now speaking loudly about how ridiculous I am beginning to find this.

"You don't believe me," he challenges, eyebrows raising.

"I would have to actually know what it is you are trying to get me to believe in order to decide if I do or not," I retort. "Please tell me this isn't some half-assed attempt at a pick-up line, because—"

"No Pan, not a pick-up line. Although, let us be honest, I wouldn't need one," he smirks before continuing. Eyeing me up and down, spurring a rush of emotions that I can't define as rage or something else I want to desperately nip in the bud. "Let's start with this then, why are



you here? Not my ship, but here. Why do you think that is? Because I know the reason, Pan, even if you don't."

He's calling me out. Waiting to see if I will admit that I need him.

"Obviously I don't know, so can we cut this pathetic attempt at some grand reveal, because you have about five more minutes before my friends come looking," I say, before trying to hurry it along. "I'll catch you up to speed quickly on what I do know, shall I? Apocalyptic scriptures are true in a sense, cultures just have pieces of the same story. It begins with the cleansing of the good, leaving those not worthy, and then judges those who are left. And now come the days before the final curtain call. Did I miss anything?"

"Our roles in it all," he replies simply. "It took me years to discover the exact truth of who we are. The piecing together of the events unfolding was easy, but the reveal of what really matters took longer. Involved a lot more.... persuasion... for those who held the information I needed. Some answers were more difficult to find than others. Their belief systems not widely given to outsiders, like other more westernized religions and myths mainstreamed into movies and literature. Getting onto the Reservations was difficult, but not impossible. The real trouble was trying to find someone I could get to speak, to actually tell me even a little about their creation and afterlife stories. And even what I could get was so little there wasn't much to go off of.""

A dark glint in his eye appears as he speaks about his adventures, the word *persuasion* laced with an ugly truth of the violent tactics he chose to use to get what he wanted. A sick feeling twists in my stomach at the thought of what he did to those people, but I also couldn't

help but wonder what I would have done if I stood in front of those holding the answers I have been dying to know. I do my best to hold back a visible shudder at the thought.

"It is not the only outer events happening to the earth, the destruction of everything, there has also been a rebirth. Of those who were here in the beginning of humanity. The ones who spoke the stories of scripture and myth. Souls returned to bear witness to the end of this world, as we all transition to the next. Figures from each of the afterlives."

"Each of the afterlives?" I ask, confused.

"Yes. It is not just pieces of the same puzzle. That is where most fail to understand. It is a variety of narratives describing the end, but each afterlife is still its own. Your beliefs decide your destination, and your actions cement your fate once you get there."

"That still doesn't explain—" I try. Getting cut off once again.

"—Why you are here, yes I know," he says. "To be honest, I am slightly disappointed you haven't picked up on it by now."

I bite my lip to hold back a retort of annoyance, reaching my limit with his vague antics. But then something he said resurfaces.

"Who are the returned figures? The ones you said came back?" I ask. Dread filling me. "We had a run in with this... thing, before finding you. Could that have been one?"

"No," Kol answers. Leaning back in his chair, observing me with his dark eyes. "I am assuming you saw one of the Horseman. Apocalyptic Beings sent to clean up whatever was left. The figures I am talking about are human, reincarnations of those who helped to predict it all in the beginning. People like us. You and me. Your friends."

I can feel the answer he wants on my tongue. Heart speeding up as my mind begins to spin its wheels. Tying everything that has been in front of my face all along. The reason behind Joh, Ez, and Mahd's dream connections. How their visions tied in so well to everything happening; why Mahd stayed while Ameira disappeared.

"It's us, isn't it. It is why we are still here," I say lowly. "My friends have some connection to all of this, because you're saying they're the reincarnations?"

"Of the Abrahamic prophets yes," he confirms. "But not just them, you're special too. Like me. And Mai." He appears to spit out the latter, confirming the disgust between the two ran both ways.

"Which at least, in your own sense, I would have thought you would pick up on. Considering your parents choice of name for you."

"My father named me," I defend.

"Yes, Pandora. After the apparent perfect gift created by the Greek Gods. Not the most common choice though, was it? And also, not as easily blended in as the others were," he says. "We are the reincarnations of myth, you and I. Born outside the normal moral constraints that handcuff your friends. It is why we have survived so long in all of this, we have the ability to do what needs to be done to protect those we love. No matter what. You can't deny it, I can see the sins of it in your eyes."

My mind instantly goes to the acts I committed over the last few weeks. The lives I chose to take, through a justification of my own.

"I didn't mean to," I start. My head down, focused on the table in front of me. "He came at me. I tried to fight him off. Get away. I didn't realize I hit him so many times until I snapped out of it."

"But if you did realize, if you could go back and stop in time, would you?" Kol asks, prodding me to reveal the truth I hid from not just Joh, but myself. Of who I have become now in this landscape.

"No," I say. Meeting his hard stare with my own. "No, I would have done the exact same thing, because he needed to be stopped. He would have kept trying to hurt me and those I love."

Kol nods, a smile on his face after getting the answer he wanted.

"And that is why you will never be satisfied with them. You can't ignore it Pan."

Before I can reply, one of the crewmen from earlier bursts into the room.

"Kol listen you need to get back upstairs. Her little friend is losing his shit. Yelling like a banshee, spouting off about us kidnapping her," Greer says. His face is bright red, some sort of soup dripping down the front of his coat. "He literally threw his food at me when I tried to tell him to relax. He is damn lucky I didn't crack his jaw."

The man storms back out the doorway, the sound of Kol's laugh following him. Greer's muttering trailing off as he heads back up to the top deck.

"Best put a bookmark on this conversation. Joh's likely to become even more persistent the longer we wait," I say, getting up. "You can continue it up there. With everyone else. They deserve to know."

Ez and Mahd stand beside a fuming Joh as the three argue with Greer and a few other of Kol's men. Mai sitting reclined in her chair, an annoyed look on her face. Arms being thrown out in exasperation as she notices me.

"Finally! See, there. She's back and unharmed it appears. Can we stop with the yelling?" Mai exclaims, drawing the attention of the others.

"You know, I don't really understand all the panic," Kol snarks, hand on my lower back as he leads me past the group to sit with Mai. "Exactly how weak do they think you are?"

His comment is a well-placed poke to a nerve of mine that Joh always hit with his overprotectiveness. My friend shooting Kol a dirty look, an insult forming on his tongue.

"Cut the crap," I say. Officially at my limit of how much Kol seems to be sucking up.

"Only saying, after everything you went through to help them. Not many are strong enough to take a life when needed, no wonder you feel like they wouldn't understand."

I ignore Joh's questioning look at Kol's words. Heat rushing to my face as a cold sweat break out across the back of my neck. It wasn't specific, but I know that all Joh needs to do is think on it for a minute. He would be able to figure out what really happened with Chauncey. That knowledge, added to the fact he had witnessed me strike the Glorie who attacked us when he was stabbed, he would never look at me the same.

"I said drop it. You have more answers to give anyways. Worry about that," I reiterate. Turning to address the others. "Kol has been kind enough to enlighten me on a few things, like why are still here, and what that means as to *who* we are."

"So, you really did find the truth then, huh?" Mai cuts in. Eyes flickering between Kol and the rest of us.

"I did," Kol says. Smiling at me as he does. "Took a bit of persuasion, but in the end, the historians agreed to show me."

Mai snorts looking him up and down in disgust. "My heart aches when thinking about what you must have done to get that. I sought answers too, the same ones."

"Yes, and it seems my tactics proved more successful in the end," Kol replies.

"Can someone explain what is going on please?" Ez demands. "We get it. You don't like each other, but we are beyond that right now. Whatever happened is in the past."

"I agree," Mahd interjects. "Move it along."

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It only takes Kol a few minutes to explain what he did to me earlier. The faces of my friends moving through confusion and into shock, like I did. Mai seeming to only have all her own predictions confirmed.

"I wasn't sure... I had my guesses, just you like Kol, but I couldn't be sure," Mai mutters. "And do you know? Who is who?"

"At first no," admits Kol. "But once I narrowed down you and I, I knew it would be a matter of process of elimination from there. You, Pandora, and I were obvious. The other three are much more interchangeable, but it became easy once I realized your current names match so well."

"Match so well to what?" Ez asks.

"Match who you were, or are I suppose. Names carried throughout scripture and myth: Johnathon and Ezra, the Christian and Jewish prophets; Pandora, the perfect woman gifted as a pawn by the Greek gods and goddesses, bringing the deadly sins and keeping hope locked inside."

He points to each of us as he says the names.

"Maitreya, the Enlightened one, yours stared me in the face for longer than I'd like to admit," he says chuckling to himself. Eerily at ease during all the revelations. "Mahd, you surprised me the most. The last connection I put together. I was too focused on prophetic figures. Mahdi, protector, leader, figure who didn't prophesize, but *was* prophesized. By the scriptures of the apocalypse."

"And so then, who does that make you?" I ask.

"I myself come from myth as well," he replies. A glint in his eye. "Norse to be specific, a figure named Loki. A little backwards play on my own name. And these men, the apparent lost souls of an ancient crew. One to be raised during the end times in preparation of our final battle, Ragnarök."

"Trickster," Mai snorts, eyes rolling. "How fitting for you."

Another flash lights up the horizon, the skyline brightening as if streaking with a lightning we can't see. Striking beyond the dome-like ceiling above us. The sound rattling us this time, deeper than the last. The bass of it shaking the boards of the ship. Cups and bowls clinking harshly as they slide around. Struggling, I force in a breath of air, my chest squeezing against the pressure from outside as I grit my teeth against the vibrations.

"Damn," coughs Greer, getting up from where he had fallen. "That had to be the longest one yet."

"Two more," Joh says. Straightening the cups in front of him.

"Technically," Mai confirms. "But I don't really think anyone—or anything—will be around long enough to hear much of the seventh call."

Before we can continue our conversation from before, a few men pop up from the lower deck. Both spouting off about some problem below, Kol and Greer promising to return in a few minutes as they follow the two heads back down the hole.

"Okay so now that they are gone, I want to do a quick check in, because what was all that?! Are we actually believing all of this?" Joh exclaims, leaning in to speak lowly to us. Trying to avoid catching the attention of the other men still loitering around the top deck.

"It's true. All of it," Mai says. "I know it all seems crazy but it's true."

"She's right Joh," I cut in. "I can feel it. It all makes sense, the dreams. The connections. And to be honest, why not believe it? Why not allow ourselves an answer that can help make all of our struggles not just a product of bad luck. Don't you get what this would mean? It would mean we aren't bad people Joh. That we aren't here because we deserved it, or because we are like Gedeon and all the others. We're here for a *reason*. All of us."

I pause for a moment before turning to speak to Mahd directly, the doubt on his face reading as the most obvious.

"And Ameira, she stayed as long as she did because she was meant to be here with you, during your journey. You needed that support and reassurance from her, and it is why she



remained here when all the good people left; she stayed right up until the very last moment of the cleanses," I say. "And Ez, same with ReeRee. There was a reason she had prophetic dreams, and why she, of all people left here, was given a child to bear. The mother, *Mary*.""

"She's right," Kol confirms, almost reluctantly. "A saviour child is prophesized in a lot of the scriptures."

The group is silent for a minute, heavy with my words. Whether or not Kol is a madman didn't matter in the moment. The tight knot that formed itself in my chest when I lost both my parents finally began to ease, knowing that it is not because I disappointed them, or because of the unthinkable acts I kept having to commit to keep my loved ones safe, that I am still here.

"Regardless," says Ez. "We can't stay here. I'm grateful for the bit of food, but it is clear these people are not exactly .... stable-minded, to put it kindly."

"I agree, I'd rather not repeat the conversations I have overheard since being here, but simply put, they are not individuals we want anything to do with," adds Mahd. Looking over his shoulder to make sure our conversation hasn't gained too much attention. A few of the men having taken to staring over at our group, their hawk-like gaze giving me an uneasy feeling.

I know they are right, but something strong inside is screaming for me to disagree, to say no. That I was staying, after finally finding someone who seemed to look at all the ugly acts I committed and justify them, wiping the guilt from my shoulders.

"You promised," Joh reminds, his brown eyes staring deep into mine. Bringing up what we swore to each other before stepping foot onto the ship. "I'm done. We found out what we could. I want to leave."

"But—" I start.

"No. No, but. I always do what you want, I always support you. You wanted to go, I packed up my life into a few bags and walked away from everything I had left—simply because you asked me to," he said. "I'm calling the same from you now, my gut says we need to leave. So, we're leaving. Right now. Before another one of those loud calls happens again, the time-frame between them is getting increasingly shorter, let us just get in our car and go."

Looking at Mai, I try to gauge her reaction to everything. Our new friend having stayed silent during all of this.

"Oh, I thought it would be obvious," she says to me, catching on to the look I am giving her. "Pretty sure I made my distaste for this group loud and clear the second we showed up. I am ready to go whenever you all are. Even if the end is inevitable in the next few hours, I would rather it happen as far away from that man as possible."

"Fine," I agree in defeat. "But let's just slip out as quietly as we can, Kol isn't giving off the vibe that he is interested in saying any good-byes to us right now. And I would rather avoid any conflict trying to get out of here,... he may not have the best morals, but he did feed us and offer us a place to stay comfortably until whatever happens happens. Told us things he didn't need to."

Knowing that I have officially lost any chance in convincing them to stick around a bit longer, I nod to Joh. Motioning for him and the others to get up, pushing in our chairs as we move away from the tables. The group of us heading towards the ladder, climbing down under the watchful eye of all the crew. A few following down right behind us.

"No need to come looking for me," Kol's voice sounding from one of the long hallways. His figure coming into the light, Greer by his side. "I'm right here.

"Actually, we are just on our way out," Joh says, moving in close to me. His remark drawing the attention of Kol. "Thank you for the wonderful hospitality, truly, but we need to get going now. So much more to do and so little time until the end of the world. I'm sure you understand."

Kol is staring at me now, his eyes trying to catch mine as I keep them pinned on a spot over his shoulder. Refusing to look at him, knowing that whatever connection I felt when meeting him is still there.

"And is this what you really want Pandora? To leave?" he asks. His voice patronizing me, taunting me in front of the others. "If you go with them, you will be doomed to go when the world does."

"And you can offer me something else?"

"Yes," he says. His words sure. "We will go with the next call, before the last one, to fulfill our prophecy; the end of here and the beginning of our greatest battle in Valhalla. To fight in Ragnarök, to have a role in it all is an honor; to see a clash of the greatest gods and their armies. I wasn't lying earlier when I said that something in us calls to each other, come with me. Choose an afterlife that will let you truly thrive."

"Enough Kol, we all have our own place destined for us," Mai argues back. Her words clipped, voice sharp.

"But not fated. There is always free choice, to choose whatever fits best," he bites back. Reaching for me, his fingers trying to twirl gently into mine before I pull back. Stepping closer to my friends behind me.

The softness he has shown me is gone now, the kindness in his eyes shutting off the moment I hesitated. The step I had taken backwards when he reached for my hand being enough to shatter any façade he was keeping up for my behalf. Realizing what I already knew, that there was never a point when I was going to choose him over the others. Regardless of how much Kol wants to try to make me believe I am too dark for them, I know that he's wrong.

"Just let us leave Kol, it's not worth the fight and you know it."

"Oh please, Pandora. You know that even if there were two of each of you and your friends, you still wouldn't stand a chance" he berates. Tone mocking now, as his face morphs into a cruel expression. "It's fine. You want to stick around here? You think that you're going to be so happy, go ahead. See how much longer they accept you once we are out of the picture, and you go back to being the only murderer in the group."

His words sting me like a slap, each one causing a jolt of pain.

"Hey, you don't know anything," Joh says angrily. "I've known her my entire life, and she has done nothing but what she had to, to protect those she loves. She's the bully who bullies the bully. Spitting image of her father, with the heart of her mother. And if any of our group sees her actions as anything other than acts of bravery for us, then we will be just fine with the two of us. Trust that."

I can't speak passed the lump in my throat without causing the tears that I am holding back to spill over. Joh coming to my defense in this way destroyed all of the worries I have been having, that I was becoming someone he would hate.

"We're leaving Kol. All of us. Just let it end as it is meant to," Mai says. A pleading look on her face. "For once in your life, just let someone go without a fight. We have hours left, why spend them fighting a death that is already promised by something else."

"You mean, you all have hours left," he begins. Looking long and hard at me for a moment, memorizing my face before breaking away. "We have only a few minutes."

His gaze is on the top deck opening, the sky outside slowly lightening. As if starting the beams of the beginnings of a sunrise. The sign that another one of the calls is coming, the sixth one.

"You should probably get off this ship before it hits, or you're all catching a ride into the Norse afterlife whether you wanted to or not," Kol says, before turning to begin shouting directions to his crew. Yelling about preparing the ship and supplies the best they can. My eyes follow his back down the darkened hallway, watching him turn once more to look back before disappearing around a corner.

"Pan, we need to go!" shouts Ez. Grabbing my shoulder to rip me from my stupor, eyes still glued to the last place I saw Kol.

Our group begins sliding down the hull of the ship, grabbing the hanging handholds we climbed up to slow down the best I can, but the floors are slippery and wet from the others coming in and out from the muddy landscape outside. The ship now beginning to shake as the long call of the trumpet starts.

"Hurry up, we aren't going to make it," Mai shouts from behind.

I let go of the hold of the side of the hall, leaning back as I slide down. Picking up speed before my hands grab the edge of the door the crew created in the side of the ship. Torn metal slicing into my fingers as I hold tight, grabbing Joh's shirt before he slides past me. The rest tumbling out behind us, our feet pounding down the ramp as we sprinted towards our SUV.

"How far do we need to get?!" I shout.

"Don't know," Mai shouts back, climbing into the driver's seat. "But I'll say as far as we can is a good bet."

The engine complains at the harsh treatment, tires spinning as Mai floors it. Foot to the mat as we take off, the back end fish-tailing through the mud; the bumping makes it hard to see but she aims it toward the road we came from, arms straining to keep us straight.

My head is pounding now, the call still steadily growing as we drive. Like a loud increasing siren, building higher and higher before it hit its high note. A sonic like blast bursting out from the line of the horizon, looking like a sound wave rushing through the sky towards us, a dust cloud picking up beneath it.

"Oh my..." Mahd trails off, eyes wide as he stares. Head spinning towards the front as he shouts at Mai to keep going. To not let up on the gas.

The sound wave encompasses Kol's ship as it rolls over it, the image shimmering like a mirage for a moment before it fades softly. Disappearing from the landscape as if it was never there. The sound wave going with it.

"It's okay," I say. Breathing shallow as I stare in disbelief. "It stopped. They're gone... the ship, all of it. Gone."

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XXVIII: Ez

Location: Northern Ontario

We kept driving for the next hour, not knowing where we are going or what the point of even trying to get anywhere is anymore. But having been moving for so long, all of us didn't seem sure how to just ...stop.

"Gas is getting low, might as well pull over somewhere. Have a fire, or something. Not sure what else there is we can do," I start. Looking in the back at Joh and Pan passed out on the seats, one snoring lightly. Mahd leaning against the back, eyes open as he stared silently at the passing landscape. Lost in thought.

We pull over into a field behind the ruins of a strip mall. The signs still left on some of the businesses are weathered to the point that I can no longer read their names. The storefronts all empty now, the front glass windows are shattered, the insides of the old buildings too dark to see much inside. I can't help but think of all the people who once walked here, crowds of shoppers all lost in their own little worlds; all of them having no idea what was coming.

The shopping center being an ugly reminder of how much has changed; the earth may still be here but our world, the human world and everything we knew it to be, has really vanished forever.

There is a large open field in the back, full of broken debris for us to gather and get a fire burning. The warmth from the flames doing its best to cut the chill that has settled into my bones over the last few hours. The others joining us with sleepy eyes after a few minutes.

"It's weird isn't it," Pan whispers, her voice loud in the silence. The fire crackling quietly. "After running for so long, this acceptance of knowing that we aren't going to survive. No matter what we could try, or how hard we fight. It is almost..."

She trails off, staring into the flames for a minute.

"Freeing" Mahd finishes for her. His fingers twirling the wedding ring around his left finger absentmindedly. A reminder of what is still always on his mind.

"We've been in survival mode for so long," Joh adds. "Feels like my body has been in a constant state of creating adrenaline for years; but now, knowing that all there is to do is wait, it is like my head can finally clear. Everything isn't spinning at warp speed."

I know exactly what he means. It feels like I have finally stepped off the uncontrollable merry-go-round that had become my life. This constant needing to move, to keep people safe, to make things better, to keep things running. Now none of it mattered anymore. And while the realization of my impending end is hanging over my head, there is a part of me that is so glad to just be done. To know that if everything is true, and that there was a reason for me being here and for all of this, then wherever it is I go once the final call comes to pass, will be better than any life I had tried to rebuild here.

"I don't want to drive anymore," Mai says. The odd statement taking me off guard until I catch sight of her. Reclined, leaning back on her bags. Eyes staring up at the dome above us. "No



more running, no more searching. I'm tired. And here seems as good as any to ride out the end, no? Everywhere looks the same at this point, here is as good as anywhere now."

"One of my favourite things about the night sky before everything changed was the fact it was different depending where you were on earth. The stars above our own heads seeming so immense, unchangeable, yet someone on the other side of the planet was staring up at a sky full of the same stars they've always seen. Same, but different. Something that promised this vast expanse of the unknown, reminding us the lights above us are not dormant. but great burning suns, filled with planetary systems just like ours. The sublimity of it all... it hasn't been the same since it all went blank," Pan says. Her eyes scanning the blank canvas above. "If my end in all of this means a place up there, or at least one where I can still see them. I think that will be enough for me."

"Do you think it will hurt?" Joh asks from his place sprawled out next to Pan. "Like when it happens, and we go."

"Not at all," Mahd replies. "I don't believe it will feel like anything more than a soft transition, like the unnoticed moment we fall asleep, only to realize it once we have woken up again. At least that is what I hope. Personally, I am willing to deal with a bit of pain if it means I get to leave this place, be reunited with Ameira. Funnily enough, she was always more religious than me. Held the belief of a future promised peace, even when I let my darkest doubts get to me. If it's real, then she's still out there, and I'll do anything to find where that is."

Mahd's eyes finally seem to release a lot of the sorrow that has riddled them since losing his wife, as if a weight is being released. Opening up to whatever is going to happen now.

While I never found someone to share my life with, I can't help my thoughts from filling with the memories of my brothers and sisters. Our family gatherings, nights filled with laughter and love. Losing them all at once had been something I thought I could never recover from, ReeRee finding me the minute I awoke had a been a blessing. Who knows what I would have done if I awoke alone and overcome with all that grief.

"I'm just ready for anything really," I add. Bunching up my coat underneath my head as I laid down on my back, aligning alongside the others. All of us stretched out on the dirt surrounding the fire. Lost in our contemplations. "It has to be better than this. I am so done with waking up everyday in a fight or flight state. Besides, if everything that is promised in a lot of the scriptures and prophecies is accurate, it may not be so bad. Sounds pretty nice actually."

"I agree, Nirvana doesn't sound too terrible after the last few years I've had," Mai says, letting out a small laugh of relief. Taking in a deep breath before releasing it, a sound of content leaving her.

"You know," Joh begins. "Growing up, my dad wasn't into the whole religion aspect, at least not in the way my mother and Pan's was. But he did love space, it enraptured him, the immensity of it, the unknown. To the point that I think he idealized it to becoming literally everything to him. One day, I caught him staring at this image on his computer screen, this bright glowing form. Like a large golden strip, with tunnels of light branching off from all sides. And when I asked him what it was, he said that it was our supercluster and that our milky way galaxy existed in one of those bright glowing appendages branching out. I remember saying how pretty it was, bright and huge. Looking like a flying golden Being in space that we are apart of, and he had laughed saying that I sounded like my mom. That when he had shown her, she called it her

heaven. The tunnel of light leading to the supercluster from our galaxy being the path she believed we all take."

Joh pauses, his throat appearing to tighten at the mention of his parents.

"Where do all the other tunnels lead, do you know?" Pan asks. Her hand coming to hold his, squeezing tightly as the sky above us begins to lighten. The horizon getting brighter as the minutes passed by, giving warning that the time is coming soon.

"No. Maybe to all the other afterlives, the ones promised to us. That we will leave here, only to end up where we are meant to," Joh replies. Tears now come steadily from his eyes as he swallows hard. "But I know that if it is where we are all going, even if we aren't meant to all stay together, that it'll be okay, because I don't think anything dark can live in that light."

The trumpet call is sounding now, the call low. A melancholy tone echoing across the landscape as a bright light pierces over the horizon one last time. Like a shining spotlight, absorbing everything it touches as it spans outwards.

"So, this supercluster, this golden being we're all part of, does it have a name?" I ask. Closing my eyes. I feel the warm breeze of wind, my body relaxing into the oncoming vibrations of the call.

"Laniakea," he whispers. "He called it Laniakea."

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