

MARTH'S NOTEBOOK

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Based on, the novel by Curtis Fulster

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EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

Martha and Ava amble down the sidewalk. Their shoes CRUNCH through bright, fall-colored leaves.

As they approach a large hedge two large silhouettes jut out on the sidewalk and the hedges rustle. They're startled by two deer that gracefully strut across the street.

MARTHA

They're so cute, aren't they?

AVA

Sure, if you like things that actually notice you exist.

MARTHA

Boys are stupid.

AVA

Understatement of the year, Martha.

MS. WALZ

Girls! How was school today?

MARTHA

"I got my first A in writing.

MS. WALZ

Congratulations, Martha! That's wonderful.

Ms. Walz exclaimed, clapping.

MARTHA

Thanks.

AVA

Boys are complicated creatures

MS. WALZ

(laughing)

Oh, Ava, one day all this boy trouble will make sense. High school boys, especially fifteen-year-old boys, can be confusing.

AVA

Doubtful.

MS. WALZ

Well, you two have a good rest of your evening, alright? And tell your parents I said hi!

EXT. MARTHA'S HOUSE - DAY

Ava creaked the front door open. The air inside felt heavy, like walking into a room filled with water.

DAD  
Martha! Ava!

MOM  
Don't you dare try to distract me  
from this conversation, Peter!

With his baseball cap that was practically glued to his head, Dad's athletic frame leaned against the bottom banister of the stairs in the same polo shirt and jeans he always wore. Mom's rage filled her short, full figure, and as she interacted, her hands danced in the air, causing her golden-diamond bracelet to bounce light everywhere like a disco ball.

MARTHA  
Hi, Daddy.

Ava blew him a kiss.

DAD  
Girls, go on upstairs.

We scampered upstairs.

AVA  
I can't wait anymore. Look what I  
got for you, Martha.

Ava shuffled through her backpack until she gently presented me with a leather-bound notebook.

AVA  
I got this for you since you're  
getting more into writing," You can  
pour all your thoughts and worries  
onto paper instead of keeping them  
bottled up. It could be a good  
outlet.

MARTHA  
Really?

She writes her name on the notebook.

AVA  
It's all yours.

DAD (O.S.)  
 ...spend more time with your daughters instead of those frequent trip. And those incessant business calls. They don't need you as much as we do.

MOM (O.S.)  
 Work is important, Peter. You have no clue what I'm a part of...

Ava leans against the wall, trying to hear more.

AVA  
 Let's focus on this, okay? On us.

MARTHA  
 Okay.

AVA  
 Martha, that notebook is for you to pour out your frustrations and anger at Mom.

MARTHA  
 An outlet?

AVA  
 Everyone needs one. Some people... they eat their worries away, or worse. Me? I've got soccer... and this

Ava reveals a digital camera.

AVA  
 Shh, it's our secret. I got it with my saved allowance... and maybe a little 'borrowing' from Mom.

MARTHA  
 Stealing?

AVA  
 Let's call it an advance on life's harsh lessons.

MARTHA  
 Cross my heart, But it is going straight into my notebook, far from their prying eyes.

AVA  
 Imagine us years from now, You, a world-changing author or poet.  
 (MORE)

AVA (CONT'D)

Me, capturing moments that take  
people's breaths away. We'd be  
unstoppable, huh?

Their shared amusement stops as they reach the front door

EXT. MARTHA'S HOUSE - DAY

DAD (O.S.)

Monica, you work too much! It's an  
obsession!

MOM

Peter, grow up Money is power, and  
I have plenty of both. I am the  
only strength in this family! This  
family would shrivel and die  
without me.

DAD

Strength? "You're just  
overcompensating for the lack of  
control in your childhood, Monica.

MOM

Overcompensating? I am creating  
something monumental. No one can  
stop me. Not even you. One day,  
I'll wield ultimate power!

Martha tries not to listen as she writes in her notebook.

AVA

Just let it out, Martha. Everything  
you're feeling, all that pain, use  
the notebook to hash it out...

Martha smiles and nods as she looks at her sister. SCREAMS.  
The girls exchange a panicked glance then rush to the window.

Ms. Walz, flees from a grotesque figure hot on her heels.  
Green lights illuminate ominously from the back of the  
assailant's hands and neck like an electronic toy of death.

Ms. Walz stumbles onto the sidewalk

Ms. Walz's screams dwindled, replaced by a haunting silence  
that echoed with the occasional distant cries of others  
succumbing to the same fate. I buried my face in Ava's  
shoulder.

AVA  
Shh. I've got you, Martha. Stay  
quiet

A dark, tattered figure dashed through the yards, its movements too jerky and unnatural to be human. It chased three kids that sprinted desperately for their lives. The youngest stumbled over a garden hose, scrambling up before the monster could reach him.

Screams echoed from every direction, a festival of pure panic. Doors slammed, engines roared, and tires screeched as neighbors tried to outrun their gruesome end.

MARTHA  
Is this—is this real life?

AVA  
We'll be okay, Martha. We need to  
be.

LIVING ROOM

DAD (O.S.)  
Enough! Just stop, Monica! What is  
that? You hear that?

MOM  
Really, Peter? You'll do anything  
to get out of an argument,

He makes his way toward the front door.

The front door slams.

MOM  
Finally, once this divorce is  
finalized, I can live happily  
knowing I did the right thing.

MARTHA'S ROOM - DAY

Neighbors continued to dart between houses. Screams pierce the evening air.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)  
(panicked)  
Peter!

Dad runs into the street, one zombie locks onto him. A man in tattered, casual clothes. Bullet holes and bloodstains covered his body. His limbs jerked in unnatural ways as green lights illuminate ominously from its neck and hands.

Dad dodges the creature's lunge, their deadly dance inches from catastrophe.

MARTHA

Run, Dad, run!

Dad continues to run, dodge, and fight off the creature. Dad runs from the street toward their SUV.

MARTHA

Get it, Dad.

He grasps the door handle with urgency. The door didn't budge. Desperation paints his face as he realized the keys weren't in his pocket.

The grotesque monster barrels at Dad, and its limbs flailed. Dad swings around the vehicle, keeping the SUV between him and the monster.

AVA

Keep moving, Dad!

He slips around the back of the SUV, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the monster. Then another figure darted past them, barreling down the middle of the street. A stranger runs from a female zombie with a mangled leg.

AVA

Look!

The zombie's attention snap to the new prey. Its bloody head swivels with a sickening crackle of vertebrae.

MARTHA

Go. Go. Get away from him!

Dad runs off and the girls run to another window.

In his driveway a few houses down, Mr. Morrow struggles against another green-glowing zombie- thing.

Dad launches at the zombie with the force of a semi-truck. A gut-wrenching scream echoed from the altercation. A cry of pain that cut through the muffled shuffling and growling of the skirmish.

AVA

(shocked)

Mr. Morrow!

Mr. Morrow clutches his cheek as blood cascades down it. The eerie, emerald glow that had once illuminated the zombie's neck and back of its hands, flickered erratically before dimming into nothingness.



MARTHA

Please be okay.

AVA

Let's get some things together in case Dad wants to leave or something. I don't want to stay here with those things outside. We have to be ready the minute Dad comes in the door."

MARTHA

Okay.

They quickly gather their things.

DAD (O.S.)

Girls! Pack what you need, now! We're leaving immediately!

The girls quickly fill their backpacks.

MOM (O.S.)

Leave?

DAD (O.S.)

Outside, Monica! Do you have any idea what I just went through? We need to go somewhere safe. Maybe the mountains.

MOM (O.S.)

And abandon this house? Do you have any idea how much we've invested in this place?

DAD (O.S.)

Monica, this isn't about the damn house! Are you girls ready.

The girls run down the stairs.

LIVING ROOM

The girls enter.

DAD

Monica! Come with us or don't. I don't care anymore. I need to get these girls to a safer place. If you want to stay in this house with whatever craziness breaks in, be my guest. We're leaving.

(to the girls)

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)

Stay close. No matter what happens,  
it's going to be okay.

MOM

Peter, what in God's name is so  
terrible out there that we have to  
abandon our home?

DAD

I saw things so bad you'd leave all  
this behind if you were in my  
shoes? Monica, it's not safe here.  
We need to go now.

MOM

Peter, this house is solid. It's  
worth a fortune. We can hunker here  
and wait out whatever is going on.

DAD

Money won't matter if we're dead.

MARTHA

Are we really going to throw away  
everything for some panic?

The girls scuttle toward the front door.

DAD

Monica, we leave now, or you're  
staying here!

Her eyes dart from the stairs to the door. Mom runs upstairs.

DAD

Are you girls ready?

They nod as they put on brave smiles.

DAD

Listen, I don't know what we'll  
face out there, but I need you both  
to be brave. Can you do that for  
me?

AVA

We can.

DAD

Promise you'll do whatever I say?  
It's all to keep you two safe.

AVA/MARTHA

We promise.

He kisses them and then grabs the keys off the counter.

DAD

Let's go. We're going to run to the car. Ready, set, go!

He opens the door and they sprint to the car.

INT. CAR - DAY

They quickly settle in.

DAD

Come on, come on.  
(yells out the window)  
Monica!

The passenger door burst open. Mom clutches a fire safe like the cure for some terminal disease.

MOM

Now I'm ready.

DAD

Always about the valuables.

He shot a quick smile in the mirror, then threw the car into drive.

Every few blocks, they encounter pockets of horrid groups of monsters staggering after frantic residents. Most of the creatures were grotesque.

MARTHA

Look at their hands and necks!

Each creature, no matter how decayed, have something glinting from the same spots on their skin.

DAD

Monica, keep that thing in your lap.

MOM

Peter, you don't even know all the important paperwork sitting inside. This safe will be worth millions!

DAD

Money will be meaningless in an apocalypse, Monica. That's now an anchor for our family!.. Everybody hang on!

Dad swerves the SUV as a creature lunges at them.

MOM  
Where are we even going?

DAD  
Somewhere safe. Somewhere isolated.

MOM  
(annoyed)  
Scoite's Peak?

DAD  
Exactly.

He gives a quick glance in the mirror and a thumbs up.

DAD  
Whatever happens, remember, I love  
you both.

MARTHA/AVA  
We love you too, Dad.

THE NEXT MORNING

Mom and the girls are asleep as Dad drives.

DAD  
(quietly)  
Hey, sleepyhead. Did you get a  
little rest?

MARTHA  
Yeah.

DAD  
We don't have long until we'll  
arrive at Scoite's Peak.

Towering trees create a frame around each scenic view as the town that emerged from the mountain's peak simulated a page torn out of a storybook.

Mom awakes clutching the safe on her lap. Relief washes over her after realizing she still has it. Ava spins around, checking her surroundings for danger, before a relieved smile rolled across her face.

DAD  
We're here. "Girls... welcome to  
Scoite's Peak.

Martha presses her face to the glass, taking in the buildings left untouched by tragedy. Several two and three-story structures with mountains behind them.

MARTHA

Wow.

DAD

Beautiful, isn't it?

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

The car rolls into a parking spot parallel to the sidewalk. Gravel crunches beneath us as Dad shuts off the SUV.

DAD

Okay, let's just get our bearings before we head out.

His hand slides over the horn before he slams it down. The shrill blast of the horn slices through the quiet town.

MOM

Peter! What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to alert all the psychos that there's a new meal in town?

DAD

Easy, Monica. It's a precaution. If anything's lurking about, better to know now than when we're out there.

MOM

Precaution? You call that a precaution? Do you want us to be trapped in here? You're willing to put your family right in the path of whatever attacked you?

DAD

See? It's like ringing a dinner bell. If any of those things were here, they'd be right on top of us by now.

MOM

Great, Peter, but did you think about it echoing through the mountains? We're on top of a mountain. That sound could roll for miles. You might as well have lit a beacon for every infected in the area!

DAD

Let's just—let's be quick about this. There...

(points)

That could give us a good vantage point to see any trouble coming.

The car doors open. The family emerges. Mom gets out the slowest being careful with her safe. She lags behind the group as they make their move.

MOM

Shouldn't you lock the car?

DAD

I'll leave it unlocked. Might be someone's last resort to escape those things.

MOM

Great. So, when we come back, will we find the car stolen because of your charity? We're already scraping by as is. Let's leave the house behind. Let's leave the car behind. What are you going to leave behind next?

DAD

(light, mocking)

You? Do you ever think about anything besides money? Dad made sure those words were loud enough to hear. What next? Are you afraid we're going to run up a tab in one of these bars? Maybe they won't even let us in. You know, dress code and all. We have two minors with us.

He turns to Ava and Martha and winks. They stifle their giggles.

DAD

Come on, before someone or something sees us.

They cautiously tiptoe to the door of the hotel. Dad enters for a beat and then pops his head out.

DAD

Coast is clear.

AVA

Stay close.

Mom bee-lines for the reception desk. She sidles behind the desk and rifles through drawers with a thief's desperation. She emerges with three bills pinched between her fingers and a necklace. e.

MOM

Jackpot.

DAD

Monica, that stuff isn't worth anything anymore.

MOM

You're not worth anything anymore. While you play the hero, I'm securing our future... Or my future. Look at these beauties. They could easily be worth ten grand each if not more.

She tosses the rings, cash, and the necklace into the safe.

MOM

I might have just made tens of thousands of dollars while you've been honking horns and lollygagging around.

DAD

Keeping the girls safe is the only thing I care about. And the girls will always be worth more to me than money. Hey girls, should we take a peek at The Peak's peak?

MOM

Stop screwing around, Peter, and get us to safety.

MARTHA

That was a good one, Dad.

AVA

I liked it, too.

ROOFTOP

Dad cautiously poked his head through the doors.

DAD

This way, ladies.

They follow. Mom tucks the safe against the door and immediately re-stacks the backpacks on top. They gravitate to the railing.

AVA

Feels good, doesn't it?

MARTHA

Feels like it's washing everything away from the last twenty-four hours.

DAD

Girls, this is a special place to me, a place where I always got a new perspective on my problems. No matter what I went through, this place always helped me. I'm hoping this place can help me one more time.

MARTHA

How many times have you been up here, Dad?

DAD

Since my parents first took me up here when I was about thirteen, wait—no, I was twelve—probably about twenty times. I've tried to come up here at least once a year. But lately I've been up here a few times this year.

A curtain moves, someone quickly looked out.

MARTHA

(to Ava)

Did you know there were other people here?

DAD

That could have been a warning or a threat, but either way, we need to get inside.

A guttural scream shatters the tranquility. It wasn't entirely human, but more of a synthesized human sound created with electronics.

DAD

Inside.

AVA

Is that... one of them?



MARTHA  
I don't . But Dad's got us.

DAD  
Girls, don't move.

Another scream, more desperate in distress.

DAD  
Stay quiet. We don't let it know  
where we are until we know what it  
is.

AVA  
Is it one of those things?

DAD  
Whatever that thing is, it has the  
green lights on its neck and hands  
but it can scream? Could be  
something worse.

MARTHA  
Then what do we do?

DAD  
We survive. Like we always have.

INT. HALLWAY

The family follows Dad's lead.

AVA  
Martha, stay close.

They approach an open door.

DAD  
Stay here.

MOM  
Peter, be careful.

AVA  
Whatever happens we stick together,  
okay?

Dad sticks his head out.

DAD  
Clear.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Untouched by the chaos that reigned outside its walls, the room felt typical aside from the discarded suitcase.

An unusual scream rang out, Dad shuffles toward the window, his movements slow and deliberate.

AVA  
See anything?

He shakes his head slowly.

MARTHA  
Will we be okay?

AVA  
As long as we're together, we're more than okay. We're a family. That's what matters, Martha.

DAD  
Who did you hide that safe from?

MOM  
From the poor, desperate people of the world, of course.

DAD  
Let's get comfortable, girls.

MOM  
Try to rest.

MARTHA  
Will things ever be normal again?

MOM  
Normal is nothing more than a setting on a dryer, sweetie. Let's get comfortable for tonight.

The light of dawn crept through the crack in the curtains. Dad looks out the window.

DAD  
Is that what made the noise?

The girls perk up.

DAD  
There's someone out there. It's a woman. She's just... just walking down the middle of the street. No concern or fear whatsoever.

MOM

Does she look like one of them?

DAD

There's a green glow on the back of her neck and hands. And she's limping on a mangled leg.

AVA

Is she heading toward us?

DAD

Can't tell yet but we need to be ready for anything."

AVA

Let's just take a quick look.

DAD

No. We can't risk moving the curtains too much. It could draw their attention. And I'm not sure I want you two to see... what happens out there if anything does?

The girls sigh and settle back onto the bed.

DAD

I'll explain everything that's happening outside, okay? Outside... The woman is still limping down the middle of the street." His words confused. Nothing had changed since he spotted her. "That green glow on the neck and hands, that's how you know they're not human anymore.

MARTHA

Is she dangerous?

DAD

Very. But not just her. All those things are dangerous, and we must always assume they are dangerous.

AVA

Thanks, Dad for keeping us informed and for protecting us.

He nods and smiles.

DAD

Try to get some sleep, girls. I've got this... She stopped...

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)

She's in the center of town, not moving a muscle... Her head, it just snapped backward. Like a puppet with its strings yanked too hard.

A unnatural scream reverberates

DAD

She created that noise. That scream... It's not human, not anymore. It's screaming with no one around, though. Is this some sort of trap, or disfunction of whatever is controlling this thing

AVA

Is it done?

DAD

Yes. For now. She lowered her head to 'normal' and started walking, again, like nothing happened.

MARTHA

Like she's not a monster...

DAD

Exactly.

MARTHA

Will we be okay, Dad?

DAD

Always. As long as I'm here, you'll always be safe.

(at the window)

No. No. You idiot, no. Go back inside.

AVA

Dad, what's happening?

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

No! Don't! Please don't! Please... stop!

Dad jerks backwards away from the window He crashed to the floor with a thud that shook our fragile room.

Mom awakes in a violent thrust, peering around the room at the creator or the noise until she noticed Dad slumped on the floor in a trance.

AVA

Is he—is he okay? What happened?

Martha runs to Dad.

MARTHA

Dad? Are you okay?

He remained motionless. His eyes wide open yet unresponsive,

MOM

Peter? Peter, what happened?

DAD

(still in shock)

It wasn't just the girl.

MOM

More of them?

DAD

Six... there were six others. They came out of the alleys and buildings. They ambushed him.

MOM

What do you mean, ambushed? Is the man okay?

DAD

It doesn't matter, Martha. We need to secure this room now.

Ava jumps from her bed and shoves furniture against the door.

MOM

We need to be quiet.

Mom shoved everything away from the door just enough so she could toss the suitcase across the hallway.

MOM

Stupid Thing

The suitcase smashes into the door, and falls to the floor. The thud ricochets throughout the hotel. Dad immediately sprints to the door and, as quietly as possible, shoved their barricade against it.

DAD

Are you trying to get us killed?

Martha dives into bed and pulls the covers over her head.

AVA

Stay quiet. Maybe they didn't hear that.

Glass shatters in the distance. Stampeding rushes the stairwell like an earthquake. The herd of nightmares rush past our door. The crash of a door being obliterated echoed through the building. A distinct SHOT rang out from the street.

Dad's rigid posture broke as he tip-toes toward the window.

Another thunderous boom split the air, followed by a distant, triumphant shout.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

I think I got one dem sum-bitches!

The earth-shattering rumble stamped down the stairs. More glass shatters as they reached the street. Dad recoiled from the window, squeezing his eyes shut hard.

MARTHA

Is it over? Did the stranger win?

MOM

Peter, please. What happened this time?

DAD

I can't don't ask me to explain it.

AVA

Stay with us, Dad.

He crawls into bed like a snail. Everyone else follows.

AVA

Promise me, Martha, that we'll always look after each other.

MARTHA

I promise.

Martha's eyes get heavy about to sleep.

DISTORTED FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hello.

Martha's eyes snap open.

DISTORTED FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Please come outside.

She looks at Dad, he's snoring. Martha slips out of bed and creeps to the window.

DAD  
They're all gone. The zombies left.  
Get back in bed.

She immediately turns around. Martha grabs her notebook as she gets in bed and then begins to write.

AVA  
Martha? Couldn't sleep much either?

MARTHA  
Nightmares.

AVA  
Putting that notebook to good use, eh? You probably have a lot to write about with everything we've been through. Keep writing and I don't doubt your words will help somebody one day, even if it's the last person on Earth... Let's hope today is zombie-less.

MARTHA  
Every day we're alive and together is a good day.

MOM  
(as she awakes)  
Where is it? Safe? Where's the safe?

She launches herself to a sitting position and her stone-cold eyes searched the room.

AVA  
Mom, you hid the safe in the closet.

Dad flings himself up. His panicked eyes scan the room.

MARTHA  
Where's your, you know, you still have it, right?

AVA  
Oh, yeah!

MOM  
Can't you two just keep quiet?

As the camera emerges, Ava instantly shot a picture of our hotel room. The shutter echoed like a jackhammer in the silence of our room.

MOM

Where did you get that from, Ava  
Pyu Noirytz?

DAD

Monica, we don't have time for  
petty things like a camera.

MOM

Did you know about this, Peter?

DAD

No, but it doesn't matter right  
now. Even if she explains how she  
got the camera, what are you going  
to do, return it? I don't think any  
stores are open for returns or will  
even care about returns right now.

MOM

Stop with your sarcasm.  
(to Ava)  
You, missy, we'll discuss this  
later and you will explain where  
you got the money for that camera.

DAD

You two can discuss the camera when  
the apocalypse is over.

AVA

I bought it! I needed an outlet for  
myself. With everything going on  
between you two.

MOM

Your parents' divorce, you mean?  
So, it's my fault you have this  
expensive looking camera?  
(sees the notebook)  
And what about you, Martha Priom  
Noirytz? Is that your outlet?

MARTHA

I bought mine, too. I needed  
something to help me with the...  
divorce.

MOM

Saved up? Well, what are you going  
to do about this, Peter?



DAD

Should I ground them? Tell them they can't go outside, or they must stay within sight? Monica, look around. They're already being punished for something. I think we can let this go.

Mom snorted, realizing Dad was right, but hating it all the same.

DAD

The girls could hide way worse things than notebooks and cameras as their outlets.

He walks to the curtains and peeks out.

DAD

We should head out soon.

Mom goes to the closet and the girls pack up their things.

DAD

Alright, everyone. Ready for our first day of vacation?

MOM

Really? Because we're hiding in a hotel room? Are you kidding me?

DAD

Better go grab a bite from the continental breakfast before we head out. Save me a waffle.

The girls laugh. Mom finally wiggled the safe out of the closet and jerked it up off the ground.

DAD

Monica, are you going to lug that safe everywhere?

MOM

I must. There are things in this safe that I need to keep secure. Things that could destroy our world.

DAD

Things? What 'things,' Monica? How could whatever is in that safe destroy our world any more than it already is?

MOM

Obviously, it contains money and several things like the girl's birth certificates and our passports, but there are things from work I just can't leave anyone else in control of.

DAD

Like what? What's in the damn safe, Monica?

MAN'S VOICE

I'll replace your heart with this chest if you ask what's inside again.

MARTHA

Can we just go?

They gather themselves and Dad quietly leads them out.

LOBBY

They stroll through the lobby until Dad's arm shot out like a security barrier.

Two figures stroll down the street, a dark-skinned man in a black hoodie and jeans hand in hand with a pale woman wearing a light pink hoodie. The characteristic green glow that instigated terror was absent.

Dad creeps toward the entrance and motions for them to hide. He continued to watch the couple from a crouched position.

Mom runs with the safe for the car. She launches into Dad, and their tumble flings the door and Dad into the open. The safe scrapes the door with a metallic screech before tumbling to the ground in a thunderous commotion.

Ava and Martha sprint toward Mom.

DAD

Monica, what have you done?

The man quickly turns and points his gun at Dad.

DAD

Please.

MOM

Lower the gun.

The man hesitates, his eyes bounce between them and the woman by his side. Ever so slowly, the barrel of the shotgun lowers.

DAD

Thank you.

The woman whispers urgently to the man. His shotgun clunks against his thigh as he motioned us forward.

MAN

Quiet.

Dad locks eyes with Mom as he whispers in agreement with the stranger.

DAD

Monica, leave it. We got lucky this time, but I will not risk our safety a second time.

Mom's face twists in disdain.

MOM

Fine but give me a minute.

Mom lugs the safe back inside. The rest of the family sighs and looks to each other then look all around their surroundings. She finally returns.

DAD

Was that so hard?

MOM

Yes.

DAD

Where did you hide it?

MOM

Let's just say I secured my secrets. If you ever hope to uncover them, I'd suggest protecting me as much as the girls.

DAD

Why am I not surprised? Always looking out for number one.

Their cautious steps crunched the gravel as they approach the strangers. A guttural, electronic roar reverberates through the air. Dad's eyes meet the man's in a silent exchange of terror and strength.

With a swift hand gesture, the man ushers them toward the woods just a few buildings away in the direction they walked.

Branches slap against their faces as they plunge into the underbrush. They reach a ravine and they take a moment to breathe and introduce themselves.

DAD

So, who are you two?

SAMUEL

I'm Samuel. This is my girlfriend, Jordan.

DAD

Samuel, Dad acknowledged, and Jordan. Nice to meet you two. I'm Peter. These are my daughters, Martha and Ava, and my wife, Monica.

SAMUEL

We thought by staying quiet, maybe they would think the town was deserted.

DAD

Samuel, what have you seen them do?

SAMUEL

It wasn't much different from what you saw. About twenty unarmed or lightly armed humans against a horde...

DAD

Is there any way to stop them? To fight back?

SAMUEL

They act like zombies from the movies we've all watched, except they consume everything. Flesh, bone... nothing remains. We've seen them stand up to guns, knives. Nothing seems to stop them. Some survivors say you can kill them by destroying a microchip. Neither of us have gotten close enough to confirm that, though.

DAD

Microchip? It only takes one? We've seen one taken down...

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)

but only once. That rumor seems to match what I witnessed.

SAMUEL

These are only rumors, though.  
"I've never witnessed it.

DAD

If there's even a slim possibility we can beat these things, we need to take it.

(silence for a beat)

Samuel, listen, we have a car stashed back in town. If we can just make it there, we could get out of this hellhole and find somewhere safe for all of us.

Laughter spilled from Samuel's mouth.

SAMUEL

You drove that red SUV, right? You didn't see it when you left the hotel, did you?

DAD

No, I... I didn't look. I focused on you and Jordan and whether you were friends or enemies.

SAMUEL

Exactly. You didn't see it because it wasn't there, Peter.

DAD

What are you trying to say, Samuel?

SAMUEL

The Chippers. That's what we call them and what we've heard others refer to them as. The infected, it seems, are all controlled by some sort of microchips. The more survivors we found, the more the title seemed to circulate. But those Chippers destroyed your SUV, just like they've destroyed every car we've seen enter town.

DAD

So they understand cars?

SAMUEL

Yes. So, whenever they find one, they tear it apart or something.  
(MORE)

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

Finding a car in this world is rarer than finding a unicorn.

(leans in)

Have you ever heard the zombies talk before? Seen them do anything besides mindless killing?

DAD

I heard the screaming one in town.

SAMUEL

They didn't do that before. That's because they're evolving. At first, they were erratic, mindless, but now? Now they hunt in packs, ambush, and even use tactics like feigning injury or danger to lure us out of hiding. They're learning.

DAD

You two don't seem scared by any of this.

SAMUEL

We're not scared of what the Chippers can do. We're terrified of what they will learn to do.

DAD

Careful.

His hand steadies Ava as she stumbled over a hidden root. The trees thinned as they ascended.

SAMUEL

There.

He points at a break in the trees that framed a sheer cliff. A protective perch high above the chaotic world.

A little later, they emerge from the trees to a campsite overlooking the valley below. A collective sigh escapes their lips as they get off their feet and take in the view.

Samuel and Peter shared a silent exchange of relief and child-like wonder. They stepped closer to the edge, hands on hips, surveying the land with a sense of ownership. A reward for the days of travel through a zombie filled valley.

SAMUEL

Would you look at that? You can't beat this view.

DAD

The perfect location to stay for a while. Trees for protection, plenty of room to sleep and that view...

The girls look at each other with a smile. Samuel and Dad stood over a patch of ground and mapped out a campsite with animated gesture after animated gesture.

DAD

Right here, we can build the campfire and easily fit six tree stump stools around it. We'll have this view behind the fire, and just over there is where we'll set up the sleeping area. Not much protection from the elements, but more than nothing.

SAMUEL

A perfect spot to watch for Chippers and maybe some sunrises with Jordan. We can take turns scouting the valley below.

DAD

What a terrible gig. We have to take turns staring at a gorgeous view?

Dad and Samuel share chuckles. Ava and Martha laugh as well.

AVA (O.S.)

Come on, Martha!

Martha looks around and then above. Ava perches herself on a sturdy branch on a nearby tree.

A LITTLE LATER

Ava and Martha sit like birds watching over the nest.

AVA

Who would've thought climbing trees would be a break from the apocalypse?

MARTHA

Definitely beats running from zombies.

Below them, Mom scoffs at them, on her chair-shaped rock for her throne, distant from the rest of our group.

MARTHA

Shouldn't she be helping.

AVA

Let her be. She believes the world owes her something. Let's just enjoy this moment. We're safe.

MARTHA

Safe.

DAD (O.S.)

Hey, you two gonna build a treehouse up there or what?

AVA

(laughing)

Maybe we will!

DAD

You'll need someone to help with the foundation. I'll be there in a jiff!

MOM

Peter, is this really it? This is where you want us to live?

DAD

Monica. Where else do you suggest we go? A hotel?

MOM

Somewhere nicer than this,. We deserve more than sleeping in the dirt with who knows how many bugs around us. Don't we?

Samuel stops chopping a tree into sections.

DAD

Monica, right now, any building is a beacon for the Chippers. They're hunting and they're smart enough to know survivors hide out in buildings. Hell, they're smart enough to know we use cars to escape. We need to do things they may not understand.

MOM

Well, you'd think the man leading us would've thought of that sooner.



Dad shrugs and continues chopping tree stumps. Samuel glances at Dad.

SAMUEL

Who says he's in charge?

DAD

(playful)

Do you really think we'd let you be in charge?

Jordan, meanwhile, had amassed a small pile of firewood, piling it up next to Samuel's firepit.

AVA

Martha, do you think she'll ever get it?

MARTHA

Get what?

AVA

That this is how it is. That we need to stick together and make do with what we can to survive.

MARTHA

Maybe, for now, let's just hope these trees and that firewood keep us safe.

AVA

Look at them,. It's like they're playing house in the middle of the apocalypse.

A snap of twigs yanks their attention to the surroundings,

AVA

(whispers)

Did you hear that? Martha?

MARTHA

We're not alone.

AVA

Could be an animal.

MARTHA

Or Chippers. Samuel mentioned witnessing an ambush by the Chippers.

AVA

Maybe... maybe they don't know  
we're here yet. Maybe they're just  
passing through."

They stay silent and press their backs against the trunk as their eyes darted between the shadows created by the setting sun.

The expected glow of malevolent green never appeared. Instead, a glint of metal winked at me from the dense foliage.

AVA

"There! Look! Those aren't...

Two figures start to approach and Samuel quietly greets them.

SAMUEL

Elu! Calian!

MARTHA

Friends? That word still exists? We  
should go meet them.

SAMUEL

Everyone This is Elu, and her son,  
Calian.

Both are Indigenous with survivalist appearances. With pistols in their hands, the boy, Calian, wore a dirty baseball cap that radiated a fearless energy.

A light danced in Ava's blue eyes as they met Calian's. He matched her gaze. They're about the same age.

DAD

I'm Peter. That bundle of joy over  
there is my wife, Monica. And these  
are my daughters, Martha and Ava. I  
offered a small wave, the weight of  
eyes on us.

Ava's lips curl into a shy, flirtatious smile. Obviously, a subtle playfulness directed at Calian.

As the others exchanged greetings, three more figures emerged behind Elu and Calian. Despite their hesitation, they couldn't resist the allure of human connection.

DAD

Welcome.

Martha writes in her notebook as the survivors get to know each other.

The broken family of three opened up as they huddled for warmth and security. The mother, Jenn, remained petrified, but tried to stay strong.

Jenn keeps a tight grip on her two children, Thomas, who had short spiky hair beaten down almost as much as him, and Whitney, who mimicks her mom in every way except height.

DAD

Guess we're gonna need more room  
around the fire.

Samuel and Dad roll a sizeable rock toward what was slowly becoming our circle of safety.

DAD

Can you tell Samuel and I love rock  
and roll?

Samuel laughs so hard he fell over the top of the rock. Aside from the two, the circle remained quiet, with some eye rolls and Mom growing enraged at Dad's enjoyment.

The flickering campfire casts a warm glow across every face.

DAD

Has anyone else noticed we haven't  
seen or heard a Chipper in a few  
days?

JORDAN

I wonder if this is a new  
evolution. Maybe they won't need to  
feast on humans anymore.

I glanced at Jenn and her kids, huddled like lost birds. Their eyes, vacant and hollow with grief. Thomas clung to his mother's arm, while Whitney's head rested on Jenn's shoulder.

MARTHA

Maybe Jordan's right.

ELU

We once encountered an... unusual  
survivor. This survivor was a true  
survivalist type. He'd found a  
government outpost just outside the  
mountains.

DAD

A True Survivalist, huh? So, a crazy, whack-nut conspiracy theorist?

AVA

An abandoned government outpost?

CALIAN

He said there were Chippers inside, just two of them, though. At least he thought only two.

MOM

Only two?

SAMUEL

Could mean something. There were two Chippers inside a government facility? Either the Chippers are searching every building possible... Or it's a trap.

ELU

Exactly. We need to be extremely cautious. If there's one thing we've learned, it's that nothing is as it seems anymore. With these things and their 'upgrades,' we can't allow ourselves to get complacent anymore. That's what happened with... Dad.

She glances at Calian with a sorrowful smirk.

DAD

Then we'll be careful. One wrong choice, and who knows how many of us will have to pay that price.

ELU

There were documents scattered everywhere. But... the documents told a story we couldn't have imagined. The beginning of all this madness... it wasn't some bioweapon or a disease like the stories we've read or watched. It was all started for... AI entertainment.

SAMUEL

AI? Like Artificial Intelligence?

ELU

Teens and avid gamers were lured in with promises of the ultimate virtual gaming experience. They had microchips implanted into their skin, hoping it would lead to gaming like the world had never seen before.

Elu's hand clutches the back of her neck, as if she were checking for a hidden microchip. Most of the group does the same.

AVA

Microchips for a gaming experience? Sounds more like someone wanted-

ELU

Control. You're right. Ava, was it? They wanted to play God. Some people will never be content with what they have and will always want more. That's where egos come in.

DAD

Some people don't feel alive unless they have a puppet to control. And the government was the base for all of this?

ELU

That's what the Survivalist gathered from other survivors and the government facilities he infiltrated. The government is using a company as the front for all of this, to give more credibility to the idea that it's just an entertainment system. The one thing he couldn't figure out was why. Mind control, of course, but why mind control? For military purposes? For testing? Just because they can?" She let out a frustrated sigh. "He couldn't find more than that. It's like he vanished, leaving only shadows and silence.

MOM

(incredulous)

Mind control. Do you really believe all that? The guy probably was a conspiracy nut and just wanted something to believe in.

(MORE)

MOM (CONT'D)

None of you truly know the when,  
where, why, how... or the who of  
how this started.

Ava and Martha look to each other and roll their eyes.

MOM

Whoever did this either had good  
intentions with a dangerous plan,  
or bad intentions with an evil  
plan. Either way, someone lost  
control while trying to gain  
control.

AVA

So, what do we do next? We've  
survived this long. The reasons  
behind this and who is responsible  
won't matter if we can't survive.

SAMUEL

We must survive. But the question  
is, for how long? If someone  
released these demons into the  
world, who knows what other horrors  
they've unleashed?

DAD

Or will unleash. As much as we'd  
all like it to be, we can't count  
on this spot being a sanctuary  
forever. We need to keep moving,  
find answers, and maybe stop  
whatever is going on.

MOM

I told you we should have gone to a  
hotel.

MARTHA

We need answers. But can we find  
answers if this survivalist  
conspiracy guy is gone?

DAD

We can try. Tomorrow let's search  
for a more secure place to call  
home and then work on finding  
answers. For now, let's rest.  
Tomorrow's a new chance to get a  
win in this nightmare.

ELU

He said he saw a Test Area in one  
of the facilities.

(MORE)

ELU (CONT'D)

Blood splatters everywhere, bullet holes riddled the walls. Whatever the government tried to do to stop the Chippers... it didn't work.

AVA

Can you believe it? All of this because of a video game?

MARTHA

More than a game. It's like we're living in someone's twisted version of reality, or maybe this is the game and we're nothing more than extras.

JORDAN

Guys. We need to come up with a plan. These things were too much for the government and they're evolving all the time. If the government's attempt to stop them failed before they could improve themselves, what chance do we have unless we figure something out and quick?

SAMUEL

We need to 'upgrade,' too. We need to learn as much as we can about the Chippers and find a weakness. There is a location we need to find. It seems like this government facility has lots of answers we need and maybe a way to stop these things.

MOM

Speak for yourselves.

MARTHA

Mom. We're in this together. We need to-

MOM

Martha, please, save your speeches. I'm not interested in playing the hero. I just want to stay alive.

MARTHA

Survival works out better if we stick together and work as a team. And maybe look for something beyond just yourself!

DAD

Enough. We're all scared. But  
turning on each other won't help.  
We need unity now more than ever.

A heavy silence, thick with unsaid words and collective fears, settled over the group. The campfire appeared to shrink as if it grew fearful of the surrounding darkness. And in that moment, between the embers and the encroaching shadows, we understood the fragility of our situation.

Calian, "The Survivalist, mentioned that the facility just outside the mountains contained most of the information he gathered himself. He thought if he could explore it further, he might get more answers... maybe figure out how to stop these Chippers."

DAD

Was he certain?

CALIAN

Pretty sure. He planned to search the facility further within a day or two of us seeing him. Said he heard rumblings that this facility held all the answers. He believed this main government facility was the place. Before we left the Survivalist, he had one last bit of information." The Chippers... their upgrades don't just affect how they hunt us They're becoming harder to kill.

SAMUEL

Harder to kill?. Did he say why or how? Is there anything we can do to stop that?

ELU

He was about to divulge more about the resilient upgrades and how to battle them. Then an electronic scream cut through the area and drowned out his words as we scattered. We haven't seen him since.

AVA

Sounds like they just continue to evolve,

DAD

Or adapting.



SAMUEL

Either way, we'll need to be even more careful now. If they're 'upgrading' or whatever, we don't know how many upgrades they've received or how long they will receive them.

DAD

Could their ambush skills have improved? Or do they have new tactics to implement?

SAMUEL

Maybe, but what if that survivalist guy never realized you need to destroy the Microchips? That's the only sure way to stop them, right?

MARTHA

Could they be adapting to how we fight? How are they learning?

AVA

Do the microchips send and receive data? Where is the data sent to?

MOM

"Smarter zombies or not, does it really matter? They can still kill us.

AVA

Did you hear that?

Everyone stared at a spot in the tree line.

A blur of russet fur darted through the underbrush, startling us into silence. A fox, with its ears pinned back and eyes wide with fear, charged past our circle.

JENN

Wow, look at that!  
(to her kids)  
Isn't it cute?

MOM

Never seen a fox before.

Elu and Calian exchanged a loaded glance.

CALIAN

Mom, you thinking what I'm thinking?

ELU

Yep. That fox wasn't just out for a stroll. It was fleeing something."

Silence then an electronic fox call, distorted and unnatural, filtered through the trees.

DAD

Everyone, stay calm.

Elu rises, her posture transformed into a soldier preparing for battle. Calian stands as an equally intimidating foe, preparing to fight by his mother's side. Jordan scrambles up and clutches Samuel's hand as she feigns strength.

Mom and the girls creep closer to Dad. A single green glow illuminates the tree trunks as the Chipper paused at the edge of our camp.

DAD

Stay behind me.

MARTHA

We can get through this, together.

ELU

(whispers)

Let's not give it the chance to call others.

SAMUEL

Here, right now, this is our ground. We will not budge.

The green glow remains motionless.

JORDAN

We're stronger than this Chipper.

CALIAN

There's no way it's alone.

On cue, more lanterns of light pierced the darkness.

ELU

Focus on the now. We will survive this. We fight together and we stop these creatures here and now.

Calian grips a pistol attached to his right hip.

SAMUEL

Stay strong and fight together.

The green lights remain still in the darkness.

MARTHA

(whisper)

We stand together.

Calian raises his gun and pulls the trigger. The chipper he shoots at charges.

Every bullet hits its left hand, shredding it and the attached microchip. The zombie collapsed to the ground, sliding to a stop at Samuel's and Jordan's feet. Shocked, Samuel and Jordan can only mouth the words, "thank you.

As if stunned, the remaining Chippers stood motionless. None of them moved or reacted to the takedown of one of their own.

MARTHA

Are they... are they waiting for something?

SAMUEL

Could this be a trap? No one get too comfortable yet.

ELU

Maybe they're... studying what just happened?

CALIAN

Doesn't matter. We stick to the plan and protect each other. No one gets left behind.

Dad and the girls pick up a branch. Mom hides in fear behind her rock.

DAD

Stay close.

A guttural snarl breaks the silence. A Chipper lunges with a jerky, swift motion at Jordan with predatory hunger. Jordan freezes in fear.

MARTHA

Jordan.

Samuel raises his shotgun and the shotgun roars with a thunderous blast. The shell connects with the zombie's leg, parts of the zombie shredded apart. The force sends the zombie sprawling to the ground amid a spray of dirt and torn foliage.

DAD

Nice shot, Samuel!

A second Chipper lunges from the shadows of the tree line. Another blast rings out, and the ground shudders under the impact of the Chipper slamming face first into the dirt.

Jordan wastes no time smashing the zombie in the neck with her branch until the microchips crunches to pieces.

JORDAN

Babe! I got it!

DAD

Nice job, Jordan! Keep smashing those Chippers!

Rustling leaves as the remaining five Chippers shift into an evenly spaced circle around them.

An especially gaunt figure with eyes like blood-filled voids arches its back grotesquely and flung its head skyward. The noise that spilled forth was not human nor animal, but a series of non-linear screeches and whirs. The sound mimicked a broken radio signal mixed with a loose serpentine belt.

Elu and Calian's synchronous tactics.

AVA

Martha, watch out!

She jerks back just in time to dodge a clawing hand.

A thud and a grunt as Dad grappled with a creature. Ava tried to find her opening to strike the killing blow while Dad kept the Chipper occupied.

DAD

Now, Ava! Strike hard!

Ava swings with precision, but the Chipper thrashes wildly. The blow hit the Chipper's shoulder, missing the target.

DAD

You need to nail this next one.

Dad is visibly tiring as the zombie tries to capitalize. Everywhere battles raged on. Jordan wrestles a Chipper. Her branch is the only thing that keeps the gnashing teeth and desperate claws at bay.

In one fluid motion, her hand shoots out, fingers wrap around a hefty rock. Her arm draws back, and she brings it crashing down on the microchip implanted in the zombie's neck.

A harrowing scream pierces the night. Jenn clutches a rock as if her life depended on it, which it did. The last two Chippers had found their prey.

JENN  
Run, kids! Run!

CHILDREN  
Mommy!

MARTHA  
Get them out of here!

Mom's maternal instincts kick in and she rushes the kids to a trail leading down the mountainside. Jenn's screams fade into whimpers.

MARTHA  
(to the kids)  
Run faster!

A Chipper sprints at Mom, who stands at the tree line, then it quickly changes its trajectory to the fleeing siblings in the darkness where the kids disappeared.

Mom bolts back to her rock chair for safety.

An outline of a savage shadow smashed the back of a fallen Chipper's neck as the moonlight illuminates Samuel's determined face.

Nearby, Elu and Calian stand back-to-back, pistols emptied and replaced with desperation and mother-son hatchets. Elu brandishes a small hatchet and fierce resolve as she swings at a Chipper. Calian grapples with another zombie as his hatchet tumbled from his grasp.

A wounded Chipper, drags its body along the ground.

CALIAN  
Martha, help!

MARTHA  
I got you!

She grabs the biggest branch she can and takes off toward Calian. As Calian restrains its neck, she cracks the Chipper on the side of its head.

Behind them, Samuel's shotgun roars again as it silences another raging Chipper. Samuel pivots to check on the rest of us.

The sight that met him tore his heart out through his ribs. Only ten feet away lay Jordan, motionless in the dirt. The Chipper that bested her sits perched on her chest, greedily tearing at her flesh.

SAMUEL

Jordan...

Samuel's fierce stance folds into a broken man staring at his her lifeless body. His shotgun slips from his grasp and lands in the dirt and he collapses to his knees.

MARTHA

Samuel.

ELU

Martha, stay focused!

Dad's hand have snatched the neck of his nemesis.

DAD

Now, Ava!

Ava cocked the heavy branch back and brought it down on the zombie's nape. The microchip shattered with a satisfying crunch and the monster fell limp in Dad's hands.

They turn to the sound of Samuel's heart wrenching sobs.

DAD

Come on, Samuel. This isn't the end for you. You're still one of us and we're going to make it out of here.

Samuel's response was nothing more than a catatonic stare.

DAD

Stay with me, Samuel. We need you. Martha, help me over here!

He settles Samuel against the rough bark. Martha sprints over.

DAD

Martha, Ava, take care of him.

He puts his hand on the back of Samuel's head and stared deep into his vacant eyes before he whispers.

DAD

We've got you, brother.

He spins around, grabs Samuel's shotgun, and joins Calian and Elu in the fight.

Ava wraps her arms around Samuel.

MARTHA

Samuel, Ava and I are here for you. What can we do to help?

SAMUEL

Help, please.. Jordan.

Calian and Elu stand over the remnants of their battle as Dad jogs back to his girls.

A headless Chipper sprawled across the ground and another one crawl aimlessly. Feeling the battle won, Calian dashes after the orphaned siblings.

AVA

Stay with us, Samuel.

Dad and Elu approach. Elu crouches next to Ava, placing a reassuring hand on Samuel's knee.

AVA

We've got you.

Ava turns with shock and yells out.

AVA

Mom!

The crawling zombie sinks its teeth into Mom's calf. She lets out a blood-curdling scream shattered our reality again.

DAD

Monica!

She grasps frantically at where her calf should have been. Her body crumples. The Chipper continued its assault.

ELU

Don't do it!

Elu steps in front of Ava and Martha. They could only stare, frozen, as Mom's cries filled the night sky. Dad runs as far as he could before the weight of reality crumbles.

AVA

(crying)

Run... we need to go.

Dad's head bowed to the ground. His body shook with silent sobs.

AVA

Mommy!

DAD

(choked up)

I love you. Goodbye, honey.

Out of the tree line, Calian emerged. His hunched silhouette told us all we needed to know.

ELU  
Calian! Where are the kids?

He didn't speak. He only shook his head. As Calian reached them, Elu enveloped him in a tight hug.

AVA  
Samuel

Dad kneels beside Martha and Ava and hugs them.

DAD  
Martha, Ava, you will survive this,  
you hear me? You two will survive.

Elu walked up to Dad and placed a hand on his shoulder.

ELU  
Peter, Calian and I will take out  
these last two, then we'll handle  
the one with the kids. Easy  
pickings.

Elu and Calian advance. As they approached the headless zombie, it did the unthinkable. It rose.

ELU  
Kill it.

Calian flips his hatchet around and brings the blunt backside down. With a sickening crunch, the microchip on its right hand shatters. The creature's body went limp in defeat. Then, like some unholy puppet, it jerked itself upright again.

ELU  
That can't be! Hit it again,  
Calian.

With a furious yell, Calian smashes the other chip on the back of the creature's left hand. The creature stumbled again, then continued its mindless stroll.

ELU  
Check its neck!

He notices the microchip on the back of its neck remained attached, just below the decapitated cut. He cocks back and lands another blow. It finally collapses.

AVA  
Is it,.. over?



Elu sprinted toward the Chipper devouring Jordan's legs. She swings her hatchet connecting with the microchip implanted in the creature's left hand. The hand lost its grip on the calf as the zombie attempted to rise to engage Elu.

With another determined chop, she completely severs the right hand, slicing straight through the microchip. The zombie twitched a few times before it gave one last attempt at ending Elu's life.

Like a ballerina from hell, she twists around the Chipper's desperate arms and slices the back of the zombie's neck.

Calian charges like a man possessed at Mom's attacker. An animalistic cry escapes him as he tore into the distracted zombie. Calian's hatchet came down hard, slicing its neck vertically, extinguishing the green glow from one of the three microchips.

Another fluid strike on the right hand followed by a windmill like strike on the left hand made quick work of the creature.

Calian and Elu returned to our makeshift sanctuary around Samuel, who remained lost in his catatonic grief.

DAD

Elu, have you ever seen anything like that? A blue light?

CALIAN

Anybody know what the hell that was? As if these things weren't hard enough to kill.

Elu shakes her head.

ELU

I don't have a clue but I've heard rumors about them... changing... Evolving. They're becoming more lethal so they can eradicate us. I think we just witnessed... an upgrade?

DAD

Alright, we need to leave. Get somewhere safe and far from here. We can't stay here.

The survivors move one.

LATER

The group stops

DAD  
Let's rest here.

Everyone finds their own spot for their personal battles.

Calian sat side by side with Ava as they share secretive whispers. Elu sat alone on the palms of her hands. Martha writes in her notebook.

AVA  
Martha, you okay?

MARTHA  
I'm working on it.

She nods, then turns her eyes back to Calian.

DAD (O.S.)  
Take your time, Martha.

MARTHA  
Words can't bring them back.

Tears roll down her cheeks.

DAD  
No. But remembering everyone who's gone gives them extended life. They can look down on us as we look up to them.

MARTHA  
But we can never make any more memories with them, Dad.

DAD  
Maybe that's the point. You and Ava... and even I haven't had too many good memories lately with the divorce and everything going on. Now, you can reminisce about all the good memories you had over the years with Mom.

Tears fall onto her half-smile. Dad kisses her and playfully taps on her notebook.

MARTHA  
Hey Ava. Remember what Mom used to say about why we needed to study and do well in school with reading and writing?

AVA/MARTHA  
Words create power.

DAD

Indeed, they do.

Martha nods and then takes out her notebook and writes.

Ava's slender fingers curl around her camera. She flips her dirty blonde hair with its blue streak out of her face so she could frame a shot of the stream. The shutter clicks. The shutter repeated over and over.

AVA

I can't do this. Every picture feels hollow now. Like a lie I'm trying to tell myself.

MARTHA

Mom would've wanted you to keep doing what you love.

AVA

Mom. She loved things that sparkled like jewelry and trinkets... even her precious luxury watches. I guess... even if we never understood her, she was still our mom.

MARTHA

Remember the wooden, hand-carved statues she would bring home from that island? The rare native looking ones with the funny faces, and the interesting, God-like back stories.

AVA

The Huna Island statues.

MARTHA

Right, Huna Island. It always felt like our birthday whenever she returned from a work trip with a new statue. Until one day, she stopped bringing them home.

AVA

Maybe that's when everything changed. When the statues stopped, so did the part of her that cared about bringing them home for us

MARTHA

Maybe... Maybe we can discover new things to treasure.

AVA

Perhaps.

Dad's voice rose over the serene roar of the creek.

DAD

I remember getting the job offer. Monica... Mom, handed it to me personally. She had a radiating energy to her that made you feel like everything to her.

MARTHA

Did you two celebrate?

DAD

We did. I held a door open for her, much longer than I should have, because I wanted to be a gentleman. We went out for sushi, her treat, as she joked I wasn't allowed to buy dinner until I got my first paycheck.

AVA

Mom paid?

Dad nodded slowly, and a hard smile grew on his face.

DAD

Then we sat in my car for hours just chit-chatting. Mom loved music, so we took turns playing DJ and playing snippets of our favorite song before the other one couldn't contain their excitement about the next song. She was a big fan of punk music. She told me how she was very selective in her style, but once she found a band she liked, she would listen to their songs on repeat until the song became overplayed. Oh, and country music for some reason? She'd argue it was true, feelings music, but I never got on board with the twangy-ness she liked.

MARTHA

Sounds like her.

DAD

We spent every night together after that and kept it a secret from everyone at work.

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)

Mom was terrified they'd fire her for fraternizing with an intern. So we lied. Said one of us was sick whenever the other took vacation. We cherished those secretive moments like they were rare gems from a hidden mine.

AVA

Sounds like you two really loved each other.

DAD

We did. But those memories are all I have now. The secrets we kept from everyone around us just to protect each other.

MARTHA

Would you keep those secrets if you had to do it again?

DAD

Of course. We always looked out for one another. "But that was before the divorce began.

AVA

I love you, Dad.

Ava hops over to Dad like a toddler before giving him a hug.

MARTHA

Thank you for telling us all of this, Dad. I never knew.

DAD

Of course, Martha... Then, one day, came Scoite's Peak. I took her up there to reminisce about my childhood when we found a new bar. After a few drinks, my liquid courage kicked in and I led her outside. We strolled down Main Street until, under a flickering streetlight, I stopped her I got down on one knee, right there in the gravel. And I asked her to be my forever partner. To build something money couldn't buy.

His girls hang on every word.

AVA

There was a time when you and Mom  
were happy?

DAD

I've always loved her, Ava. Even  
when—even when it got tough.

Martha's hands shake as she snaps her notebook shut.

They all hug and sob.

They Release their family hug, each wiping tears. Ava looks at her muddy camera lying next to the creek. She sprints to it, picked it up, and in one motion, chucked it as far as she could down the stream.

AVA

Beauty doesn't mean a thing when it  
can be yanked from your life in an  
instant. Survival is all that  
matters now. Cold, lifeless  
survival.

The first person she locked eyes with was Calian. She shuffles over to him and bows her head into his chest and he wrapped his arms around her.

SAMUEL

Jordan and I... we met at a  
friend's house... during a game  
night.

Samuel breaks from his catatonic state and jumps right into the conversation without missing a beat.

SAMUEL

There was this buffalo-queso dip  
that was out of this world. After I  
took the first bite... I swear I  
shouted, 'Are you kidding me? This  
should be illegal!

(weak chuckle)

Next thing I knew, Jordan walked up to me with the biggest grin I'd ever seen. She asked me if I liked the dip and admitted that she made it. We couldn't stop laughing, and well, the next thing I knew, we were scheduling our first date.

His voice trails off as he retreats into his grief. He curls into an upright fetal position, drowning in his heartache.

SAMUEL

After that night, the flirting just... it was irresistible. She was the drug I became addicted to. Our first date comprised of beer, wings, and pool tables. A cliché first date, but one I will never forget.

His eyes lit up with a flicker of pure joy.

SAMUEL

Chatfield's Sports Bar ingrained itself in our lives. We watched hockey and played games until the bar closed. No ulterior motive, no trying to impress... just two people genuinely enjoying each other's company. She beat me at every game we played, even when I tried. Darts, pool, shots...

He chuckles, filled with emptiness. He reached into his front pocket. His hand tremble as he searched for the contents.

Struggling, he yanked a small box from his jeans. Everyone gasped at it. Samuel flipped the box open as a glint filled our eyes. His voice trails off.

SAMUEL

I was going to ask her to marry me.

AVA

To marry you?

SAMUEL

To marry me. I wanted to wait for the right moment, you know? When the world wasn't falling apart, or at least not as bad. I just needed a moment when we weren't fighting for our lives

His voice trailed off into deeper sorrow for a beat.

SAMUEL

I know marriage doesn't mean much anymore, not like it used to. But all I wanted to do was call her my wife. To make that promise to her, even if it only mattered to us.

MARTHA

Jordan would have loved that ring.

SAMUEL

Yeah. She might have. But I'll never know for sure.

AVA

Then let that be your promise, Samuel. With or without a ring, we could all tell your love was genuine.

SAMUEL

Let's keep moving. Let's keep moving for Jordan.

In a swift motion fueled by grief and anger, Samuel snatches the ring from the box and hurls the ring upstream as far as he could before tossing the box into some brush.

SAMUEL

I don't want anyone but Jordan.

He turns around and snatched his shotgun.

SAMUEL

I don't think I can do this alone, but I'll try.

Without waiting, he wanders off downstream. Everyone else gathers their things and follows behind Samuel.

ELU

We may have lucked out recently, but Calian still finds it hard to talk about our previous loss. "We lost Olli, my husband and Calian's dad, when this nightmare began. Olli and I, we had just gotten home from a date night.

(chokes down tears)

Calian was home alone. We pulled up to see the living room window shattered and Calian running for his life inside. Olli didn't even hesitate. He charged through the front door and tackled the Chipper just in time to save Calian. Calian escaped and jumped into our truck.

Elu swallows hard, her voice trembling.

ELU

We waited for Olli to come running out, but



Her eyes connected with Calian's as they share the burden of their loss. Calian's face lost all its color, and her eyes lost all their ferocity.

ELU

Olli never returned. I went looking for him and found him inside... most of him.

Ava turns and hugs Calian tight as his shoulders shook.

ELU

Olli's body was torn apart. I wanted to destroy the Chipper with every ounce in me, but they were still new and such a terrifying unknown. All I could do. The zombie... it ate him. How do you get over witnessing your loved one being torn apart and eaten?  
(looks to the others)  
Oh, sorry. I just—I just don't know what to do. I want to survive, but sometimes I don't.

DAD

We need to keep fighting. The ones who are gone wouldn't want us to lie down and die. We owe it to them. To Olli, to Jordan, to Mom, to everyone we've lost. If you don't want to do it for yourself, do it for them.

AVA

Martha. Promise me we'll stick together no matter what. I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you or Dad.

MARTHA

I'm not going anywhere. And not just because I wouldn't survive on my own.

A genuine smile stretches across her face.

AVA

You realize these zombies will need a complete system update to catch up with us. They'll need to create a whole new zombie type. Maybe call them Slippers?

MARTHA

Slippers?

AVA

Slippers... because we'll walk all over them.

Ava cracks up at her own joke.

DAD

Hey back there. Leave the dad jokes to the dads. Or the moms.

Dad winks at Elu. Elu couldn't help but smile at the shared camaraderie. As if breaking from a spell, Samuel let out a laugh. He tried his hardest to halt the joy, but it emerged as an unnatural cough-laugh, which made everyone laugh even harder.

DAD

(to Elu)

Hey, now that it seems we're all in better spirits, maybe you guys can train us all a little to better defend ourselves against these zombies? "We should be more prepared for the next... Chipper encounter.

Samuel nodded, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

SAMUEL

I can help with the training, too.

Calian remained silent, his eyes fixed on his worn-out boots between occasional glances at Ava.

Elu smiled at Dad, accompanied by a flirty wink.

Of course we can.

ELU

We could use a little refresher, too.

Elu bumps Calian's shoulder with her elbow. The small band trudged along the windy creek.

DAD

Getting back to the 'Super Upgraded Chippers' and calling them 'Slippers' conversation... Chipper isn't a very scary name for undead, technologically advanced zombies trying to destroy the world.

He took a deep breath and continued.

DAD  
It's like calling them 'Happy-Go-Luckys.' What if we called them 'Meanie Greenie Weenies?' That's a little catchier. What do you guys think? Samuel?

Ava and Martha can't contain their laughter. Even Calian cracked a full smile and everyone laughs in full form.

ELU  
(laughing)  
Meanie Greenie Weenies it is, then.

The landscape splits into two paths.

ELU  
Maybe there's a hidden sanctuary away from the creek. Somewhere we can catch our breath for a couple of days.

SAMUEL  
Let's go, then.

DAD  
Stay close to each other. We don't know what's up ahead."

Martha hears a soft rustling.

MARTHA  
Guys, wait!

They all turn, and every ounce of joy drained from their faces.

AVA  
Did you hear something, Martha?

Everyone's eyes scan the area from the distant creek to the thick brush.

DAD  
It could be nothing.

His hand instinctively reach for another branch on the ground, just in case he was wrong.

CALIAN  
Or could it be them?

ELU

Either way, we've got to keep moving. But let's be smart about it.

They agree with silent nods, and form a tighter line as they ascend the trail.

Martha spots something in the distance. A blue glow illuminated a patch of trees on the other side of the creek.

AVA

Martha?

MARTHA

(points)

Look.

SAMUEL

Is that...

ELU

Shh.

They watch the trees, frozen. Then, a shadow moved between them, but it was hard to make out a green glow through the like-colored foliage.

MARTHA

We need to know how to fight, and sooner would probably be better.

DAD

Agreed. We can't keep running forever.

SAMUEL

Especially not from something like them.

CALIAN

Whatever that is, it's not an animal.

ELU

Let's find the first clearing we can, and we'll begin. Then we'll deal with whatever is following us

Everyone nods

DAD

Stay close.

AVA

Martha, you know we can do this, right? We can learn together and so can Dad.

MARTHA

Thanks, Ava. I just wish we didn't have to learn how to fight.

AVA

Me too.

ELU

This is it. This is our training ground.

CALIAN

Alright, everyone. This is suitable. We'll teach you all how to get comfortable using our guns.

ELU

Even though we're out of ammo, it's important to know how to handle these weapons. You can also use the guns as blunt weapons, like you would need to today.

MARTHA

Okay, let's do this.

CALIAN

Martha, Ava. You two follow me. We'll start with the basics.

ELU

Samuel and Peter, you're with me. And bring your shotgun, Samuel.

Calian hands Ava a gun.

CALIAN

Always remember these are not toys. Treat them with respect and make smart choices.

AVA

Got it, Calian.

CALIAN

Now, imagine there's a target ten feet in front of you. You'll want to place your feet side by side, then place your dominant foot back a little bit.

(MORE)

CALIAN (CONT'D)

Remember, the gun will kick back toward you when you pull the trigger, so prepare for the recoil and don't lock your arms. Now, focus on the target in front of you, slide your finger onto the trigger, and squeeze it.

Martha mimics Calian's instructions with an invisible gun.

CALIAN

Nice job, Martha. It probably feels weird without a gun, but we can't lose any time. Keep practicing that grip and stance. You'll get the hang of it and be ready for the real thing whenever the time comes.

MARTHA

Thanks, Calian. You mean 'if' the time comes?

CALIAN

Remember, when you're aiming, focus on your target and breathe steadily. Don't jerk the trigger; squeeze it steadily. One fluid motion.

Dwindling sunlight cast eerie shadows once again. Samuel picked up a stout tree branch he immediately swung with ease.

SAMUEL

Alright, everyone, we're going to learn some tips and tricks on different ways to use tree branches on the Chippers.

Ava grabs a baseball bat-sized branch and instantly swung it like a ninja with a sword.

SAMUEL

Find a branch that's strong enough to withstand the force of multiple, rough blows, but not too heavy for you to wield comfortably for a long time. Once you've got the correct branch, you should be able to fend off any Chipper. Here are some techniques that can help.

Martha finds one.

SAMUEL

Hey, Martha. How about you and I  
train one-on-one?

Elu and Dad train together while Calian and Ava continue  
their flirtatious training tango.

MARTHA

Yeah, that should be fine, but I'm  
not very good at these things.

SAMUEL

Don't worry, I've actually taught  
dozens of self- defense classes  
before the world lost its mind.

MONTAGE - They train with each other and improve

- Samuel teaches Martha how to block, strike, and even do a  
"Punyo strike."

Samuel flashes a grin as I successfully swung my branch, spun  
it, then did a second fluid attack. "You're a natural,  
Martha."

- Calian hands guided Ava's hands on the pistol. "Remember,  
you want to always be in control. Not afraid."

Elu teaches Dad.

ELU

Remember, headshots aren't as  
crucial as the movies make them  
seem. Ammo can be useful, but melee  
weapons should be our preferred  
weapons. We need to focus all our  
efforts on the microchips.

- Samuel approaches Martha with a bigger branch than she has.

SAMUEL

Hey, Martha! I've got something for  
you. I noticed you seemed bored,  
like your branch wasn't challenging  
enough. So here you go.

DAD

She is definitely a girl that loves  
challenges and needs to be  
challenged. You've got this,  
Martha.

- Together, they practice the same moves and countermoves as  
before, but with minor tweaks to my movements.

SAMUEL

Alright, Martha, I'm going to teach you how to use this as leverage against a Chipper.

He slams one end of the branch into the soil and pressed it against the back of my knees.

SAMUEL

If you plant one end in the ground like this, you can trip or even flip a Chipper if you're forced to fight.

She does so.

SAMUEL

Whoa! Great job! Now, let's try some techniques to defend against a raging Chipper.

They practice twists and turns designed to knock an opponent's arms away as they reached for legs or arms.

SAMUEL

Martha, you're doing fantastic.

MARTHA

Thanks. I couldn't do it without your help, Uncle Samuel.

Tears flood his eyes.

MARTHA

I'm sorry? Was that weird to say?

SAMUEL

It... you're welcome, Martha.

MARTHA

Did you and Jordan ever want to have kids?

SAMUEL

Yeah. Jordan and I talked about having three kids once we were married. Both of us were only children, so we wanted to create a big, loving family together.

MARTHA

I'm sorry. It's just—



SAMUEL

No, it's alright. It's comforting to remember the dreams we once had, even if they can't come true now. If I forget about Jordan, that's when I'll truly lose her.

MARTHA

Your love for Jordan... it's so pure and genuine. She must have been an incredible person.

A tear from each eye rolled down his cheeks.

SAMUEL

She was.

A sudden, overwhelming rage hijacked Samuel. He spun and obliterated his staff against a tree trunk, and splinters shot out everywhere. The loud crack echoed throughout the forest, startling everyone.

MARTHA

Samuel! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.

SAMUEL

It's not your fault, Martha. I shouldn't have done that. It's just... those zombies stole the only thing in this world I ever truly loved, and I have no way of ever bringing her back. It's a horrible truth I'll have to accept one day.

Elu and Dad march toward Samuel and Martha.

ELU

Are you okay, Samuel?.

SAMUEL

Yeah. It's just... it's not fair, you know? Having someone you love with every ounce of your heart snatched away like nothing.

DAD

Life is never fair. But that doesn't change the fact that we must keep fighting for those who aren't here to fight. Use your memories to strengthen your spirit.

MARTHA

Let's keep training. These Chippers are tough and upgrading all the time.

SAMUEL

You're right, Martha. We can't be too prepared for these monsters.

ELU

We've all lost someone. The Chippers took my husband. Peter lost his wife. We know what you're going through. Use that pain but control it.

DAD

Our children give us a reason to keep fighting, but that doesn't mean we don't feel the pain of losing our partners. You need to find your reason to keep fighting.

Samuel's eyes fill with tears as he clutches his shotgun.

SAMUEL

This is all I have left of my old life, My family growing up they either died or walked out of my life. Jordan was the only person who ever loved me for just being... me. I never had to fake anything with her. Now I'm alone, again.

MARTHA

You're not alone, though. You have us now. You're part of our family, for better or worse.

SAMUEL

Thank you, Martha. You're right. All of you... you are my family now. My apocalyptic family.

Elu and Dad stood beside him like parents comforting their heart-broken teen.

DAD

Remember this, Samuel, We're three grown-ups and three kids who have survived the apocalypse up to this point. You're an unofficial dad, whether you like it or not. At least you didn't lose tons of sleep to be knighted as a dad.

SAMUEL

Thank you, everyone You know, if I'd had a child... I always wanted a daughter.

AVA

Wow!

She's surprised by a nearby deer.

AVA

They're so majestic.

ELU

Nature survives by never giving up. That's what we must do to survive. Despite everything, we need to enjoy what brief moments we are gifted while being prepared to defend what we have.

The moonlight cast a whimsical glow on the deer as they sauntered into the next thicket of trees.

DAD

Last time we saw a wild animal, An unusual sound followed before all hell broke loose.

Everyone shoots him a look of dread, but he smiles, reassuringly.

DAD

Don't worry. This isn't something you can jinx.

Like statues, no one moves a muscle, while their eyes darted around, checking every ounce of forest for movement.

DAD

See? I told you. Dads know everything.

Laughter spills into the forest. Elu and Samuel playfully shove Dad over his jinx. Ava and Calian, still hand-in-hand, continued their awkward teenage flirting.

CALIAN

Shh.

An unusual siren blares nearby.

ELU

Everyone, stay close.

MARTHA

Samuel, do you recognize that sound?

SAMUEL

I've never heard a siren like that. But I've never heard of a "good" siren.

DAD

Maybe it's just a malfunctioning device somewhere.

AVA

Or maybe it's a warning? Something worse than the Chippers?

SAMUEL

Let's not jump to conclusions. We know nothing yet. It could be a siren from another group of survivors.

ELU

Whatever it is, we can't stay here. We need to head in the opposite direction of whatever that is.

SAMUEL

Let's head west. We'll figure out our next move once we find somewhere safer.

DAD

Samuel, take Martha, Ava, and Calian. You guys go on ahead and we'll slow down whatever is creating this sire.

SAMUEL

I think we all know what's creating the siren, but I'll protect the kids.

Dad and Elu snuck away. Their figures blend into the trees as they headed to an overlook.

MARTHA

Can you see anything?

CALIAN

Nothing. It's too dark and too quiet.

SAMUEL

Stay alert.

A shadow crossed the creek with disjointed, snapping steps and the eerie green light illuminated its figure. Its mouth opened unnaturally wide as if to produce a chilling siren, but no sound emerged.

SAMUEL

That's... that's a Chipper?

Samuel gestured for them to halt. His eyes fixed on the lone figure below. Its head snapped back again as its eyes locked onto our position before it valiantly searched for a way to reach them. Its clumsy movements made it slip and stumble in the loose debris at the bottom of our perch.

AVA

Martha, we've trained for this. We can handle one.

CALIAN

We take it down quietly It's alone.  
And if we're fast, we won't draw  
any more of them here.

SAMUEL

If we do this, we do it right. It seems to know we're here. So let's creep down to it, then we'll all attack at once. Calian, you take the chip in its right hand. Ava, you take the chip in its left hand. I'll take its neck chip. Martha, you stay on guard in case any of us need help or this Chipper isn't alone.

The zombie continued its bizarre ritual as it struggled up the hillside toward their previous spot. Its head continued to snap back for another call, but silence followed.

Everyone froze as the grunting and groaning of the Chipper frantically stumbled nearby.

They descend upon the creature with vengeful rage. Ava and Calian flanked it with precise movements. Then Samuel directly attacked, like an arrow shot from a hate-filled bow.

A silence shattering siren erupts. Calian climbs around a tree with an assassin's expertise. He closed in on the zombie, ducking from tree to tree and motioning for Ava to stay in her hiding spot.

The Chipper pauses mid-stumble. Its head jerked to the side as if sensing something amiss. Calian launches at it and struck a leaping blow on the Chipper's neck. It stumbled against a tree. Calian swings at its right hand, but he missed. His branch shattered.

As Ava turned away from the impending end of her crush, two shadows darted from nowhere and landed two coordinated blows on the Chipper's left and right hand.

A groan escapes the creature as its limp body crumbles. The two figures stand over it as the green glow fades away. Elu and Dad stepped into the moonlight, seizing the moment none of us were strong enough to do.

MARTHA

Ava! Calian is safe. We did it!

Ava peeks through her hands, she sprints toward Calian and reaches him just as he turned to embrace her.

MARTHA

Dad...

Another siren wailed echoing everywhere.

ELU

Positions!

Instinctively, they form a circle facing outward, backs pressed together.

AVA

Stay close.

The forest oozed with movement. Shadows morphed and twisted into macabre silhouettes. The green glow reflects off their dead eyes.

AVA

Martha, whatever happens, don't give up.

CALIAN

Seventeen.

ELU

Seventeen?

CALIAN

There's seventeen Chippers. That means we need to defeat roughly three Chippers each to survive.

All seventeen zombies charged at once.

CALIAN

Keep moving! Don't stand still!

He ducks under a swipe and a shove to knock a Chipper off balance. Elu quietly drew her hatchet. Her eyes glossed over and she became a woman on a mission, she slices and guts creature after creature in fluid spins and dances

The Chippers keep attacking.

MARTHA

More of them! Stay together and keep fighting!"

Dad's movements have improved, parrying side to side as he struck the Chippers's neck.

Martha scurries through the chaos back to Ava's spot.

AVA

Martha, watch out!

She spins to face a lone zombie. It staggers toward her, and lunges at her.

She jams the branch into the earth and twisted it sharply. The makeshift lever caught the Chipper by surprise and sent its feet high into the air as its momentum threw it several feet from me.

SAMUEL

Nice move, Martha!

Samuel yells as he stomps down on a Chipper struggling to rise from the dirt.

Martha swings the branch down with everything she has. The microchip shattered and tiny crystal-like fragments glistened in the moonlight. The Chipper grabs the end of her branch with a calm demeanor. In a confusing twist, it seemed to plead for forgiveness.

A small tear rolls from the bloody eye, but its mouth curls into a demonic, threatening smile. The Chipper hurls her branch far into the wood.

It stops advancing on me when Martha's back slammed into something. She spins to find Ava in an identical situation.

The eight remaining Chippers slowly closed in on them synchronized movements. Dad and Elu shared a loving and longing stare accompanied by tearful smiles.

With her eyes still locked on Dad's, Elu called to Samuel with a calm finality in her tone.

ELU  
Hey, Samuel.

SAMUEL  
Kinda busy here!

He makes wild swings at the Chippers closest to him.

ELU  
Look after Calian!

Calian's gaze snapped to Elu.

MARTHA  
Dad? What's going on?

DAD  
Samuel, please, take care of Martha and Ava for me, too! Martha, stay strong! Ava, make smart choices and watch after your sister I love you two very much. Always remember that.

Elu sprints toward the Chipper closest to the cliff, directly across from her, and slid into its feet. The attack launches the creature to its demise. She hops up and lunges for a fallen tree trunk in desperation. As she reached the trunk, Elu struggled to lift the bulbous potential weapon.

DAD  
Go!.

Dad sprints past the creatures and heads for the same trunk. He slides up to Elu and grabs the opposite end of the trunk. Together they lift it just as the Chippers launch at them.

DAD  
Stay strong, all of you.

ELU  
Watch over one another!

SAMUEL  
Stay focused!

Samuel stands in front of the kids with his arms outstretched to create a protective wall.

Wrestling the stout trunk between them, Dad and Elu hoisted the heavy piece to their chests. The fallen tree, thick and unwieldy, demanded the strength of both to maneuver it.

ELU  
Samuel, thank you for everything.



Elu and Dad corralled the Chippers between the tree trunk and the cliff.

DAD  
Look after them and keep them safe.  
Stay safe, too, Samuel.

They pushed back as one, creating a stalemate against Dad and Elu. Dad noticed a nearby tree, locks his end of the trunk against it, and rushes to help Elu on her side so as not to lose any ground against the hellish nightmare.

DAD  
Keep pushing!

Elu and Dad pushed with every ounce of resolve.

MARTHA  
We need to help!

DAD  
Back! Stay back!

The Chippers claw at their faces and arms. Chipper claws tear into Dad and Elu. Putting their heads down, Elu and Dad, force the Chipper's backward, inching closer to the cliff's edge. The relentless zombies cling to Dad's and Elu's arms and torsos as they attacked around the tree trunk.

CALIAN  
Please, stop. "Don't do this.

Dad and Elu leap from the cliff, sending themselves, the tree trunk, and the seven remaining Chippers off the cliff.

MARTHA  
NO!

Ava and Calian collapse to their knees.

AVA  
Samuel, why?

SAMUEL  
Martha...

He reaches out, his hands around Martha and Ava.

AVA  
Stop them! Please, someone stop them!

CALIAN  
(weak whisper)  
Samuel, what are we going to do?

SAMUEL

Survive.

MARTHA

Samuel's right. We need to go.  
Let's not let their sacrifice be in  
vain.

AVA

Martha's right. We need to keep  
fighting for them.

She clutches Ava's hand.

SAMUEL

Come on, kids. We can't stay here.  
Martha, listen to me, you showed me  
there's still something to fight  
for in this hellish land. Let me  
return the favor.

A sob struggles to break from Ava's lips.

AVA

Samuel's right. Dad wouldn't want  
us to give up.

CALIAN

Everything's gone

SAMUEL

Not everything. You have us. And  
we're going to survive this  
together. All of us. Let's take it  
one step at a time. If you need an  
outlet, let's aim that anger toward  
defeating these demons.

MARTHA

Okay, let's keep going.

SAMUEL

Good. And we start now.

Samuel gently lifts Martha to her feet.

SAMUEL

Focus on your next step, nothing  
more. Martha, Ava. This is our time  
to move forward with the remaining  
family we share. Our apocalyptic  
family.

CALIAN  
I want to see her. One last  
farewell.

SAMUEL  
Calian... "That's not a memory  
you'll want.

CALIAN  
I need to.

AVA  
I want to see Dad, too. One last  
time.

MARTHA  
Me too, I guess.

SAMUEL  
Okay. Let's make this quick,  
though. Who knows how long we have  
before more Chippers appear.

Together, they tentatively approach the cliff.

SAMUEL  
Watch your step near the edge.

Calian's voice cracks as he leans over the edge.

CALIAN  
Mom?

Ava and Martha carefully lean over the ledge.

AVA  
Goodbye, Dad.

MARTHA  
Goodbye.

SAMUEL  
Let's get going.

Beneath the broken trunk, a trapped zombie thrashes. Without  
a word, Calian fires his gun.

CALIAN  
My last bullet was for you, Mom.

AVA  
Down there.

There they were, Elu and Dad. Their forms connected enough to  
suggest one last embrace amid the horror.

MARTHA  
Dad... I love you.

SAMUEL  
Let's remember them as they were.

CALIAN  
Heroes.

AVA  
Dad found love in the end. Goodbye,  
Daddy.

MARTHA  
Forever together.

CALIAN  
I love you, Mom. I'll miss you.

The sun peaks over the horizon.

SAMUEL  
Focus on the now.

Samuel offers a half-eaten bag of trail mix from his pocket.

SAMUEL  
We can't keep losing like this. I'm  
tired of saying goodbye.

MARTHA  
We can't keep up with their  
upgrades, so we need to find  
another way to beat them.

AVA  
I'm tired of losing people, too.  
There must be a way to stop their  
upgrades.

CALIAN  
Easier said than done. Every day we  
create new tactics, they evolve,  
making those tactics worthless.

MARTHA  
Dad and Elu gave their lives to  
find a solution. To give us a  
chance. They had faith in us  
discovering a way to defeat them.

SAMUEL  
Martha's right. With each person  
we've lost, we've learned more  
about how they strengthen.  
(MORE)

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

There must be a pattern, something we're not understanding yet.

AVA

But what are we not understanding? We don't even know what's controlling these things.

MARTHA

We need to learn and grow as fast as they do so we can end this nightmare. We've all paid a heavy price already.

CALIAN

They changed their tactics every time we fought them. Their attacks were sporadic at first. Then they hunted in packs then fighting on-on-one. That failed, they tried calculated attacks. They adapt with every fight. Learning and changing to our defenses, figuring out how to eradicate us more effectively. They ignored the deer and the fox. They knew we were there. They're not mindless zombies. They think. Their actions have an apparent purpose, even if it's as simple as wiping out humanity.

MARTHA

Can we keep up?

SAMUEL

I don't know how much longer we can fight them if they continue to evolve at this pace.

AVA

We need to learn more about them, understand them. They must have weaknesses.

CALIAN

Exactly! We can't outpace them, so we need a different tactic altogether.

Martha grips the pen and pulls her notebook out.

SAMUEL

We can't just react anymore. It's about anticipating their moves.

(MORE)

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

We need to do more than just try to beat them when in a fight.

Martha writes as they talk.

CALIAN

We need to stay one step ahead of the Chippers. There must be a pattern or something we're missing... but what is it?

MARTHA

The microchips seem to connect them all. Could something control them? Something upgrading them?

SAMUEL

Possible, very possible. If there is a main controller for those things, we could try to disable it?

AVA

Then maybe we could get back to a normal life?

SAMUEL

Maybe. We need to find whatever is controlling the Chippers first.

CALIAN

That's easier said than done.

Martha sighs.

SAMUEL

Martha, this is the second round of darkness we've faced. We'll probably face more, but we will push through each one.

MARTHA

How many more rounds will we face until it's our last round?

SAMUEL

Then let's make sure that doesn't happen. Let's find their control center.

MARTHA

Whatever it takes. I'll end this apocalypse. For Mom. For Dad. For all of them and for all of us.

A chilling human scream halts everyone.

MARTHA

If we keep trying to run, that could be us."

CALIAN

Where do we go then?

AVA

The government facility! Didn't you and your mom hear about a government facility near here, Calian? Could that hide some answers?

CALIAN

I completely forgot about that. They were working on... something, something that terrified the Survivalist.

AVA

Then that's where we should start.

SAMUEL

I'm sure we can all assume there are Chippers nearby, and who knows how many. I think we should hunker down for now, quietly, and get some rest before we head out. It'll give us time for whatever Chippers are nearby to leave the area.

Calian kissing Ava on the cheek as they huddled close.

A little later, Calian sits next to a still sleeping Ava. Martha opens her eyes.

CALIAN

Martha, remember our discussion earlier about the Survivalist and everything? That government outpost he mentioned. If Samuel and I are right, it could be close. If it's where I think it is. It's only a half day or less in that direction.

MARTHA

Let's go find it. Let's find this outpost and make these things pay."

Samuel shuffles through a pocket in his jeans and produces a thin pair of small gloves. He offers them to Martha.

SAMUEL  
You look a little chilled there.  
They were Jordan's.

MARTHA  
Thanks, Samuel.

He wiped away the tears flooding his eyes.

SAMUEL  
Martha, you remind me so much of  
the child Jordan and I hoped for.  
You're stronger and braver than you  
know.

Martha stands and gives Samuel a hug. Ava and Calian were on their feet across the way. They leaned into one another as they shared laughs.

CALIAN  
Keep your weight balanced. Aim for  
the center mass.

Calian instructs Ava, mimicking a stance with an imaginary rifle in his hands.

MARTHA  
Remember when Uncle Chris took us  
hunting that one time?

CALIAN  
(to Ava)  
My dad would have loved you. You  
have the same spark my mom had. Dad  
and Elu... Maybe they could've had  
something special if they had more  
time, just like-

AVA  
Like us.

Their hands meet, fingers intertwining naturally.

SAMUEL  
Maybe we should give them some  
alone time. We can head out  
whenever they're done.

Multiple birds sang their songs, and the leaves rustled.

SAMUEL  
I've been meaning to ask. Is that a  
diary or something?



MARTHA

Not exactly. A diary is full of secret confessions, and that's not me. This is my notebook. It's full of my thoughts and notes about life. Sometimes I feel like I'm about to explode with all the words running through my mind. And this... this helps me get my thoughts organized and stops them from fogging my brain.

SAMUEL

Wow. That's one of the most mature things I've heard. You understand a fault of your own and you've learned how to not only deal with it but twist it into a strength. You are much stronger than I thought you were.

MARTHA

I'm not strong. Ava is strong. My dad is—was strong.

Samuel's eyes widened as he places his finger to his lips.

SAMUEL

We need to leave.

MARTHA

Maybe it's time to search for the outpost. We can't keep running forever.

SAMUEL

We'll get answers.

AVA

Over here, guys.

Red and orange colors flicker near them as a fresh campfire burst into the dark night.

MARTHA

Do you think it's safe to light a fire when there could be Chippers heading this way?

Calian tosses twigs into the fire.

CALIAN

Those screams were far away. Even if the Chippers knew exactly where we were, it would take them a while to reach us and they're probably busy with whomever they attacked.

Ava wraps her arms around Martha.

AVA

We need to get some rest, sis. Tomorrow, we can search for the outpost. Tonight, we can get some extra rest. Who knows when we'll have another chance to have a full night's sleep.

Calian and Ava sneak off to a quiet spot under a tree where they cuddled and drifted off to sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING

The shrill cry of a distant siren tore through the stillness of the encroaching morning light.

CALIAN

It's coming from the east and we're heading west. We should probably leave now.

Martha scrambles to her feet and shakes Samuel awake. Calian takes the lead, and Ava trails close behind.

CALIAN

The outpost should be near the edge of the mountains ahead. It's weird they'd place something like a government facility near the base of some mountains with nothing around them

They zigzag through the trees, increasing our speed. The sounds behind us propelled us.

SAMUEL

Don't get too distracted. We need to keep on track and stay ahead of however ma

CALIAN

Stay close.

The forest thins, signaling our approach to the end of the mountains. Vast fields peeked through the trees, along with increasing sunlight.

CALIAN

Almost there.

The world opens as they emerge from the tree line to the expanse of the valley .

CALIAN

Look.

At their base lays the twisted forms of Chippers, torn apart by bullets.

CALIAN

We must be close. Only the government has enough firepower to do this much damage in such a strategic way.

They tread carefully past the remnants of a slaughter.

A disabled Chipper drags itself along the ground. Calian is upon it in seconds with ruthless aggression. In a swift motion, he stomps out one microchip beneath his boot and bashes the other with his branch.

CALIAN

Let's keep moving.

AVA

Look!

She points at a silhouette of a dilapidated structure illuminated by the peeking sun. Weathered wood and broken window frames hid behind overgrown sunflowers and daffodils scattered about.

Rustling leaves sounded from the underbrush. Electronic voices, synthetic and cold, sliced through the silence again.

ELECTRONIC VOICES

Help me. Help me. Hello.

SAMUEL

Shh. Hide.

The entire forest seems to plead for help. The sound of a door slamming open and shut on its rusted hinges. The repetitive banging cuts through the distorted voices.

With no other options, Samuel searches for the source. Through a window, he notices a door swing in the breeze.

He creeps forward with silent determination and nods for them to follow. Remaining one with the siding, we shuffles quietly around the decrepit house. His hand cautiously guide the door open long enough for them to slip through.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Samuel finds the deadbolt with practiced ease. The rustling and electronic voices transformed into an eerie serenade outside our barricade.

SAMUEL

Keep away from the door

The noises stop. A flickering light struggles to stay lit but reveals the destruction. Bullet holes decorate the walls. Splashes and streaks of dried blood paint a gruesome picture.

MARTHA

This--this is what the outpost offers? Is this where the government tried to destroy the evidence?

They quietly survey the mess. Martha inches toward a hallway.

CALIAN

Martha, don't.

Hundreds of empty shell casings and more blood litter the floor. Ava, Calian, and Samuel follow tentatively.

CALIAN

If they were getting rid of test subjects, and there's all this blood... where are the test subjects? Could they have turned into...

(sighs)

These holes are from an assault rifle, an M4, most likely.

Ava follows Calian.

CALIAN

Martha?

MARTHA

Calian. If they lined up a few or a dozen people right where we're standing how did they just disappear?

They go down some stairs. They reach the bottom of the staircase that leads right to an intimidating metal door.

SAMUEL

Careful.

He turned the doorknob and drops his shoulder into the door that groans as it opened gradually. There are desks littered with papers, chairs upended.

AVA

Look at this place. We need to find something on the Chippers. Anything that can give us some insight. I feel like this is the place to find answers.

SAMUEL

Got it,

He dives into a stack of folders on an adjacent desk. Ava hustles to another desk and follows suit.

Martha wanders past the desks, drawn to a dark corner with white laboratories just beyond the shattered windows separating the rooms.

SAMUEL

Martha, don't go too far.

She peers through the broken glass. Desperation and fear covered the bright environment. Broken vials and needles littered the countertops, with one hospital bed shoved against the wall and another against the door.

CALIAN (O.S.)

Anything yet?

AVA

Nothing yet. Just printed memes and emails.

Martha notices everyone deep in their research, she creeps into the nearby hallway.

HALLWAY

She can barely get the door to budge with the hospital bed, acting as a last line of defense. After several shoves, the door cracks open just enough for her to slip through.

ROOM

She steps into the white room and approaches an overturned desk in the shadows.

An overhead light hanging off-kilter, casting eerie shadows in half the room. She nudges a grotesque remnant aside with her foot.

MARTHA

Just another day in the apocalypse.

It's a mess, but among the clutter, a sheet with bold block letters gets her attention. "WARNING" the page screamed. She reads aloud to herself.

MARTHA

The test subjects were nearly indestructible. With the microchips installed, the subjects could withstand horrors that no normal person could. Dr. Marbh wants to reverse course and return to the drawing board...

SAMUEL (O.S.)

Hey Martha! Where did you go?

MARTHA

I'm over here.

CALIAN

AI controlled. The bastards turned them into AI controlled zombie soldiers.

MARTHA

Exactly but there must be a way to stop them. We can't just shatter microchip after microchip, hoping they never find a way around that.

AVA

Martha's right. We're learning about who and what they are. Now we need to find paperwork describing their weaknesses.

CALIAN

That's not all, the test subjects, thought they were part of a high-tech, advanced gaming system. A virtual reality system controlled by military-grade AI. This says it will 'make all other gaming systems obsolete. The most advanced gaming system the world has ever seen.'

MARTHA

Video games? They destroyed the world over video games?

CALIAN

Looks like that's what the test subjects were led to believe. But it was a trick to gain enthusiastic test subjects for government experimentation of a top-secret project.

MARTHA

An AI gaming system. If it's AI, doesn't that mean we could try to—

AVA

Control it or shut it down?

MARTHA

Either. Both. We must keep moving, though. There's got to be more answers here.

SAMUEL

Let's not waste time.

HALLWAY

They head down the hall, cubicles on the left, locked doors on the right, and overturned trash cans. Ava wanders off, disappearing into some cubicles

AVA

Martha, Calian, Samuel!

They head over to her.

Their screens were lifeless, with only a blue screen and a single logo fading in and out. The flickering lights above morphed Ava's face into a menacing scowl.

AVA

This place... it's military. Check out these logos, and This says the government was working with an entertainment company, using it as a front for this AI gaming system.

She holds up a binder

MARTHA

An entertainment company? Which one?

AVA  
Can't find a name.

MARTHA  
Keep searching. That name could be  
our ticket out of this nightmare.

They split up among the cubicles.

SAMUEL  
Guys! I've found the test subjects'  
names. Look at this. It says all  
test subjects were to be  
exterminated, effective  
immediately. Removing the  
microchips would fry their brains  
because of the cerebral pathways.

Everyone runs over to him.

MARTHA  
Exterminated. So, they treated  
people like faulty machines that  
needed to be recycled.

CALIAN  
Better than letting them turn into  
those... things. Still, no one should  
play God like that.

MARTHA  
Or play games with human lives. We  
need to end this for all of them,  
to spare their lives of any more  
pain.

SAMUEL  
Agreed, but is there a way to save  
them? We can't remove those  
microchips. But to save these test  
subjects, we need to save ourselves  
first.

MARTHA  
Then let's keep going. Every second  
we stand here, we risk-

A low growl echoes down the hall.

"Let's move," I whispered. I snatched some papers covered  
with warnings and protocols, and shoved them into my  
backpack.



Samuel stood firmly in front of a door, with Calian by his side as they waited for us. Calian scanned every inch behind us for movement, and Samuel watched the hallway.

SAMUEL

Alright, we have another staircase leading deeper into this place, so let's be extra careful.

They sprint down the stairs. I glanced back and witnessed the metal door bow outward as snarls continued from the other side. My body shivered at the sight.

After we'd run down five flights, it happened. The squealing and tearing of metal split the air as distorted growls filled the stairwell.

The staircase seemed endless as we finished flight after flight, a coiled serpent winding deeper into darkness.

CALIAN

Almost there.

MARTHA

Let's go, Martha.

They reach a sign: "Underground Bridge."

SAMUEL

Everybody in.

The corridor seems endless, lined with pipes on the right, cables on the left, and dim lights down the center.

AVA

Samuel, the door!

She calls while pointing at a locking spin-dial with two handles. Samuel grabs the handles and with all his might, he couldn't get the handles to turn.

SAMUEL

Help me with this.

Martha, Ava and Calian join and force the deadbolts into place with a thud that echoes down the bridge.

CALIAN

Let's keep moving.

A loud bang alerts them that the Chippers had reached the door.

DISTORTED FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hello? Let us in.

ANOTHER VOICE

I'm all alone out here. Let me in.

Martha couldn't stop a laugh from escaping my mouth. The group stares as if she lost her mind.

MARTHA

Sorry. It's just—Dad would have some ridiculous dad joke of a reply to bloodthirsty Chippers if he were here.

AVA

Remember how he always made light of scary situations? A lock is better than a B lock.

MARTHA

(mimicking Dad)

Lock, lock. Who's there? No one because the door is locked.

Ava laughs, while Samuel suppressed his laughter.

CALIAN

(laughing)

Okay, okay. We needed that, but let's not forget why we came all this way.

They ventured further from the door, led by intermittent pools of light from overhead. A sudden slam echoes from behind. They all freeze.

MARTHA

Will the door hold?

CALIAN

Of course... I don't think that was the Chippers. That almost sounded like someone unlocked the door... from the inside.

SAMUEL

Stay sharp. We don't know what that sound was or if someone, or something, is in here with us. They're bound to be—

Another slam, louder, closer.

AVA

I think I see something.

Another metal bang reverberates through the corridor, followed by a subtle squeak of a door opening.

MARTHA

That's it. They're in here.

Across from her, Samuel settles into a crouch, his shotgun aimed steadily at the steel barrier.

AVA

Do you hear that?

Martha shakes her head.

AVA

Exactly. Martha, stay down.

MARTHA

Should we continue?

SAMUEL

Just a bit longer.

AVA

Do we even try any of these doors?  
Not sure if I want to know what's  
behind them.

They come to a set of marked doors: "The Situation Room"; Samuel grunts in frustration as he rattled the handle of an adjacent door marked "Military Testing." Unable to open it they come to a separate key-card entry and a security camera above, the words "Onakele Enterprises Headquarters" emblazoned the door.

CALIAN

We're definitely not getting in there. There's no breaking into there without making more noise than we'd like.

SAMUEL

Plus, who knows if someone is watching this door, too.

AVA

Let's not stick around to find out if someone is watching us right now. We should move on." Come on, Martha. We'll find a door we can pass through."

They continue on getting more locked doors.

SAMUEL

Wait.

A door is ajar. Its lock in pieces. "Upgrade Testing Lab," the sign read. Samuel pushes the door open with the barrel of his shotgun and flips a switch. Fluorescent lights flickered to life above groaning figures. Some wore a green glow.

CALIAN

God...

The rest are too stunned to move or speak. There are six large cages, each containing an intimidating figure. Their human bodies had morphed into grotesque parodies of the human form. One thing they all had in common was their iconic, twitchy, jerking movements.

AVA

These aren't the Chippers we've seen. None of them have chips on their hands.

The creatures never lower their stares. The first Chipper, labeled "1.0" is a man over six feet that peered at us with three green microchips in the typical spots.

SAMUEL

Be careful.

The creature's lunge created a rowdy clang against the bars. Its hand clawed the air inches from Ava, halted only by the sturdy bars. She stumbles back into Calian.

AVA

God, we've seen these before.

The next cage housed "1.5," with a single green microchip in its forehead. It's still but when they get closer it emits a shrill sound, like a distorted woman's scream, but it's a man.

Creature "2.0" was even more unusual. The female's lowered head spoke to its eerily calm demeanor.

2.0

(eloquent)

You need to let me out, friend. I assure you, locking me away was a grave mistake.

SAMUEL

Like hell.

He aims his gun right at her chest.

CALIAN

That's not terrifying at all.

MARTHA

Hey, wait. This '2.0' Chipper,  
where are its microchips?

SAMUEL

It has none. I don't even see a  
glow or anything on her.

"3.0," "4.0," and "5.0: labels hung over empty cages. Their  
doors swing slightly ajar.

AVA

Think they're down here still?

MARTHA

Or maybe they weren't created yet?

AVA

Let's hope that's the case.

MARTHA

Whatever's missing, let's just pray  
we don't run into it. Let's shut  
this door and make sure it locks.

They back out of the room slowly. The Chippers' gazes follow  
every step.

Samuel is the last one out, shut the lights off.

SAMUEL

Please don't escape.

HALLWAY

A short way from the door, hidden by the shadows, crimson  
stains spot the floor.

SAMUEL

Something bad happened here.

They turn a corner and the trail of blood swells into a  
river. The move forward and a still solid shadow is up ahead.

They drew closer and a flicker of the lights cast a ghostly  
spotlight over the scene. A body leans in a fetal position  
against the wall.

Calian moves first. He drops to a knee beside the corpse. His  
movements were cautious, respectful even, while  
investigating.

AVA  
Did you know him?

CALIAN  
Yeah. This was the Survivalist. The one who told us about this place.

AVA  
Wasn't he an elite survivalist? A trained master at this stuff?

CALIAN  
I watched him once. He took down three Chippers without a scratch or wasting a bullet. Swordsman, marksman—didn't matter. He was unstoppable—was...

They move on and open a dividing door into a new section of the hallway. On the other side, it's clean, spotless.

SAMUEL  
This makes little sense.

CALIAN  
Nothing does anymore.

SAMUEL  
Keep your guard up. Clean doesn't mean safe.

To their left, a sign marked "Storage Closet" next to another sign that read "Women's" in chipped paint. To the right, signs that read "Men's" and "Executives Offices."

CALIAN  
Let's find out what's behind executive door number one

Samuel nudges the door open.

SAMUEL  
Clear.

CALIAN  
Looks untouched.

Ava rifles through the papers.

AVA  
Martha, come here.

She sees plaques and a list. "Members of the Board—Onakele Enterprises." "Executives—Military Branch of Control," and "Executive Branch—Mion-Lach Republic."

MARTHA

Any names we'd recognize?

AVA

None so far. But these are the people who were in charge. If anyone knows how to stop this, it might be them. Or at least they may have left clues.

MARTHA

Or they're the ones responsible for this.

AVA

Let's try to memorize these names. We don't know when this information might come in handy.

A creak freezes them in place. Calian emerges nodding to indicate the room was clear. Samuel appears soon after.

CALIAN

Anything important?

AVA

Names. Lots of them. Could be important.

CALIAN

Alright, keep looking. We need every piece of the puzzle we can find.

AVA

Martha, look here. It says 'Ms. M. Noirytz' on the Onakele Enterprises board.

MARTHA

Could it be Aunt Megan or Aunt Madeline?

AVA

No, Aunt Madeline is Mom's sister; she wouldn't have our last name. But Mega.. Wasn't she a lawyer?

MARTHA

Yeah, but... Do you think she could be part of this company? Of all this?

AVA

Maybe.

CALIAN  
Found something.

He waves a sheet of paper like a flag of discovery.

CALIAN  
It says the words 'DHIA AI System  
Trials,' " There's a wealth of  
information here. This could be  
big.

They huddle around the document as Calian reads.

CALIAN  
DHIA AI System has become  
compromised and must be shut down  
immediately. The Mion-Lach  
Government has lost control-

SAMUEL  
Lost control? Of the AI? Are we not  
fighting zombies? We're fighting  
against some AI system?

CALIAN  
Sounds like they lost control of  
everything. t says all microchips  
installed in the test subjects were  
to be eradicated. However, they  
can't remove the microchips without  
killing them.

MARTHA  
So, all those Chippers out there.  
They're just government test  
subjects. They're trapped in some  
government technology plan or  
something?

CALIAN  
And we can't save them. We can't  
remove the chips. We can't bring  
them back. They're gone for good.

MARTHA  
So we survive and win, because  
that's what we've done since day  
one.

AVA  
Martha's right. Let's find the  
trick to stopping these things and  
put these poor test subjects out of  
their misery.



MARTHA

We have to shut this AI system down. No matter what it takes.

SAMUEL

I want to help these people as much as you do, but even the government couldn't shut down the AI. How do you suppose we—

MARTHA

By staying alive! All we've done for days is survive. We've lost loved ones because we didn't know what we were up against or how to fight them. Once we learn more information, we'll have the edge we need to win permanently.

SAMUEL

I plan to live through this, and getting rid of these Chippers seems like the best way to do that.

AVA

And then?

MARTHA

I thought I saw a door at the end of the hall before we entered this office. If this is an Underground Bridge, it's got to connect on two sides. The other side may hold more answers. Let's go find out, sis.

Samuel and Calian follow with weapons drawn.

CALIAN

We don't know what's waiting for us beyond the door. Or down there.

MARTHA

Here's to hoping this is our way out of here.

She takes a few steps.

MARTHA

Back!

She raises her revolver. The figure is human or had been once. Its jerky movements were iconic, a bright green glow shone directly in her eyes.

AVA  
Upgraded Chipper.

The creature turned with a calm, jerky twist.

Martha aims her revolver at the demon's chest and pulls the trigger. Bang. Calian dashes toward the Chipper's motionless form. He steadies his pistol at its head, and two more shots ring out. The Chipper's burning green eyes dull.

CALIAN  
Does anyone see any microchips on this thing?" His question sliced through our brief victory.

They examine it closely but find no chip.

CALIAN  
I think it's still a Chipper.

He points at an old bullet wound hidden in its matted hair.

CALIAN  
Our bullets have fresh blood oozing from them. This hidden exit wound has none. If this wasn't a Chipper, it would be dead already.

Calian kneels by the creature he draws back, revealing a metallic object caked with blood and tissue. A microchip lodged deep within the zombie's body.

AVA  
How are we supposed to manage against 'Upgrades' and other types of Chippers? If they've hidden microchips inside them, how will we ever know who's who before it's too late? Some of them can talk now, they can ambush us... How do we stand a chance?

SAMUEL  
Could've been one of the escaped ones from the lab. Maybe it's the 3.0? Or 4.0? Or 5.0? But what if it's none of those and it's something completely different? What if it's just one of the lower ones? There might be more advanced ones than that, and that one took all of us with our guns to take it out.

MARTHA

Let's get out of here.

Samuel leads the way up the stairs. Deep scratches mar the wall up the two flights of stairs.

AVA

I bet this fight ended at that puddle.

CALIAN

Let's hope whatever did this is long gone.

MARTHA

Or lying dead downstairs.

AVA

You know, lots of zombie movies have people die in malls. At least we're not in a mall.

MARTHA

Then let's avoid malls and clichés.

At the top of the stairs, there are two doors, one marked "Housing Wing," and the other "Cafeteria."

A barracks-style dormitory, with rows upon rows of bunk beds, each meticulously made, created a military tone to the room.

SAMUEL

Looks like no one's slept here in a while.

Calian moves systematically from bed to bed. Samuel follows suit on the opposite side.

SAMUEL

Nothing but dust bunnies here.

MARTHA

Let's hope it stays that way.

AVA

Look.

Ava and Martha approached the mess of personal items while Samuel kept watch. The unmistakable thud of a door closing from the other end of the wing freezes them.

AVA

Whatever comes through that door," Ava's voice halted my rambling mind, "we do what we must.

MARTHA  
Always. Where's Samuel?

AVA  
(softly)  
Sam?

They come to a door that read, "Executive Housing." The door completely matched the wall, with only a smooth vertical handle revealing its presence.

MARTHA  
Could Samuel be in there?

AVA  
Let's check it out, but stay close.

They enter the "Executive Housing," keeping their guns up.

CALIAN  
Clear.

Calian weaves between plush, beds and elegant furniture.

AVA  
Right's clear, too.

MARTHA  
Where are you, Samuel? Samuel?

A hand grabs her arm. She screams, turns and aims her gun.

AVA  
Martha!

It's Samuel, he has a frozen pizza box.

MARTHA  
Samuel?

SAMUEL  
Did you just shoot at me? I found this. Figured we could use a good meal.

CALIAN  
Could've gotten yourself shot!

AVA  
Or worse, given us a heart attack.

SAMUEL  
Sorry, Martha.

MARTHA

'm sorry. I promise I didn't mean to shoot... well, I did, but not at you.

AVA

Let's just find somewhere to settle down for the night.

SAMUEL

Next time I'll announce myself with a trumpet or something,"

He gestures to Martha's revolver, still in her hand.

SAMUEL

Have you reloaded your gun lately?

MARTHA

How do I reload it?

Everyone chuckles.

SAMUEL

Family pizza night. Who's up for some culinary experimentation with our stovetop pizza oven?

AVA

Absolutely Can't be worse than those canned beans.

CALIAN

Speak for yourself. I'm starving. I'll take my chances with Chef Samuel's famous cafeteria cuisine.

AVA

Martha, we've got tonight to rest up. Tomorrow, we search the rest of this building.

MARTHA

Okay.

AVA

Hey Martha, what about you? If the world went back to normal, what would you do?

MARTHA

I don't really know. What would you do?

AVA

I'd find a big house, somewhere safe and warm, with someone special. Two kids, maybe. And I'd live out every single day with my family until it's my time, dying peacefully in the arms of my husband.

CALIAN

Sounds nice.

Calian smiles with a twinkle in his eyes. His hand reached out for Ava's and they squeezed before Calian kisses her hand.

AVA

Martha? There must be something you'd want.

MARTHA

I don't know. Maybe... find love? Live high in the mountains like at Scoite's Peak. Find a place like what Dad loved. Get married and have Dad walk me down... Never mind, it doesn't matter anymore. All I can think about are the Chippers. My dream future is one without those monsters in it. Even if it means giving my life to rid the world of them.

AVA

Hey. We'll figure this out together. None of us are giving up on a life after this nightmare. And you know I'd do anything to give you a better life. That's what big sisters do.

CALIAN

Agreed. Ava isn't the only one who has your back. I know we're not family, but now we're an apocalypse family, bonded together until our last days.

SAMUEL

Feast your eyes on my culinary masterpiece. I've confirmed it tonight. My talents definitely do not translate to the culinary world.

MARTHA

Hey, at this point, anything edible is gourmet to me.

SAMUEL

Jordan would have done a much better job.

MARTHA

Samuel, your pizza is perfect.

Ava takes a bite and her eyes betrayed her surprise at the taste. Calian chews thoughtfully.

AVA

I mean, it's not five-star dining, but it's got a certain... apocalyptic charm.

CALIAN

(laughing)

Apocalyptic charm. That's one way to put it. But seriously, it's good.

SAMUEL

(whispers)

Martha? Thanks for saying you liked the pizza.

MARTHA

Of course, Samuel. It reminded me of... before. You know, when things were normal. I can't believe it's only been a few days since everything went to hell.

SAMUEL

I just feel so lost without Jordan.

MARTHA

I understand. Since Dad's been gone... I've been missing a piece of me no one can replace. He protected me, made me laugh, was my biggest cheerleader, and that's all gone. I want to learn how to stand up for myself. Dad never really got to teach me. I don't want to need protecting, I want to protect like Dad always did for me, and like you, Calian, and Ava do for me now.

SAMUEL

Your dad would be proud of you. You pulled the trigger on a Chipper Upgrade. You're stronger than you know, Martha Noirytz. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you.

MARTHA

Thank you.

SAMUEL

I can't fill your dad's shoes but I'd be honored to be your stand-in dad, Martha. I promise to teach and guide you as much as possible until my final days... Or until I tell one too many dad jokes and you tell me to get lost. Goodnight, Martha.

MARTHA

Good night.

(to herself)

Peter Noirytz. Everything I do from today on is for you. I really hope I can make you proud, from wherever you're watching me from. I love you, Dad.

She hears something.

MARTHA

Samuel look.

His eyes blinked open in confusion as they studied me.

SAMUEL

Martha? You okay? Nightmare?

MARTHA

No, look. Something's wrong.

With a flurry, he gets up and seizes his shotgun.

SAMUEL

Calian! Up now!

A soft rustle came from Calian's bed as he awoke, disoriented but quick to grasp the gravity of Samuel's tone.

SAMUEL

Door.

Calian reaches under his pillow and snatches his pistol as he aims at the door.



SAMUEL

Hurry Martha. Martha, where are you going?

MARTHA

Clear.

A distorted, electronic screech tears through the facility.

Gunfire erupts as human voices call out in terror and pain. As abruptly as it had begun, silence washed over everything.

SAMUEL

We can't stay here like sitting ducks. Let's go see what's waiting for us out there. Worst case, we'll all get a family reunion with the ones we love. I'm all for family reunions but how about we push that particular gathering further into the future?

AVA

Agreed. I'm in for pushing that meeting a little further out.

They all had their weapons in hand Samuel dragged the heavy bed away from the door "Ready, Ava? Ready, Martha?" Calian asked, peeking into the next room. I nodded, not trusting my voice, and together we crossed the threshold.

SAMUEL

Let me take point.

He flung the door open, and the cafeteria door loomed ominously. Its frame marred with deep gashes and smatterings of fresh blood, another trail leading into darkness.

AVA

Remember what I said about cafeterias being death traps?

MARTHA

I know, I know.

Samuel creeps forward, and Martha follows close behind.

After exiting the cafeteria, they turned to the stairs.

LAB

They enter a gruesome trail of blood, bits of clothing, and other pieces. An electronic screech and then two more follow.

SAMUEL  
Move! Move! Move!

Samuel pushes them through the door and he races across last. The thud of heavy bolts connecting with the thick door frame.

SAMUEL  
Stand back!

A relentless rhythm of pounding that vibrated through the walls and air. After several beats, an earth-shaking crunch slammed against the door, causing subtle cracks to form.

MARTHA  
Whatever's on the other side won't  
get through

A heavy set of steps, deliberate and ominous, approached the door. Scratches, slow and deliberate, turn into twisted claws, raking against the door, emerging from bulbous arms attached to a deformed monster with the same burning green eyes.

CALIAN  
This can't be happening. That door  
should withstand gunfire and  
explosions.

A bone-jarring thud, echoes through the hollow space like a knell, punctuated the fifth and final scratch. Silence.

MARTHA  
Are they—are they gone?

SAMUEL  
Seems like it, for now.

MARTHA  
Every time I think these zombies  
can't get any worse or more  
terrifying, they do.

AVA  
Martha. Stop jinxing us, will you?  
Maybe if you quit saying things  
like that, they'd stop chasing us.

MARTHA  
Right, because the zombies have a  
lookout that waits for me to jinx  
us before they attack.

CALIAN  
Let's just hope they don't have  
good hearing.

AVA  
Look at this mess.

Ava grabs some papers lying at her feet with an annoyed swiftness. A golden crest catches Martha's attention.

MARTHA  
Does that logo mean something?

AVA  
It's a government seal. It means this must be the actual government outpost the Survivalist mentioned.

MARTHA  
Let's agree to leave any doors with heavy locks alone, okay? We don't need a repeat of what we just locked away.

SAMUEL  
Agreed. No more surprises if we can help it. We'll find something, just keep looking. Let's just hope our biggest enemy in here is paper cuts.

HALLWAY

They cautiously walk.

AVA  
This place looks empty.

MARTHA  
Too empty

They continue on and reach the front lobby and finally enjoyed the shining sun again.

LOBBY

There's solitary Chipper, its head unnaturally tilted upward as if searching the ceiling for survivors.

CALIAN  
(whispers)  
Blue. Its microchips are blue.

Samuel and Calian didn't hesitate. They sneak up on the creature and bash the microchips embedded in its hands. The Chipper releases a shrill shriek.

Ava darts behind the spasming figure before it can react. She raises her gun and slams the handle onto the Chipper's neck.

SAMUEL

Brace yourselves.

Samuel stands by the window, shotgun still in hand, staring in the distance with wide eyes and a tight grip. They crowded behind him. Seven Chippers stood like eerie security guards in the parking lot. Their postures rigidly aimed skyward, stuck in their own "upgrades."

Four more Chippers sprint across the barren landscape, their limbs jerking with unnatural speed. Another group of five followed close behind, forming a world-ending horde we had no chance of defeating.

To our left, three solitary Chippers prowled the building, their heads swiveling as they hunted for any sign of life. They acted like lookouts, trying to alert the rest of any intruders.

CALIAN

Scavengers, they're getting too smart.

SAMUEL

Maybe we should barricade one of these rooms?

MARTHA

If we leave now, it's certain death for us.

AVA

Since when has Martha Noirytz played it safe?

MARTHA

I'm not playing it safe. It's suicide out there. I'm not leaving until we find more information, or those monsters are gone."

SAMUEL

Alright then, let's make this place a fortress.

CALIAN

Keep your guns ready, and make sure they're loaded we don't know if they'll try to find another way in.

AVA

Good enough, I suppose.

A desk stood in the corner, partially shrouded by darkness, Martha is drawn to it. She grabs some papers off of it.

MARTHA

I think I got something. Looks like... profiles. Could be important. Let's show this to Samuel and Calian.

With the profile clutched in my hands, I stepped away from the desk, ready to delve deeper into the mystery that held us captive. She stops dead in her tracks as she looks at them.

Her fingers tremble as they trace the contours of familiar faces lined up on the white paper. Monica Noirytz, Peter Noirytz, Ava Noirytz.

AVA

Martha? Why is our family on this paper? Who would do this?

MARTHA

Mom... Dad...

AVA

Don't. We need to find out what asshole dragged our family into this mess. Samuel! Calian!

Martha folds the paper carefully and puts it in her pocket. Calian appeared behind Ava.

AVA

I found something. It's about us—about my family.

CALIAN

Let's see it.

AVA

Anything?

MARTHA

Nothing yet. Just more questions.

AVA

Keep looking, Martha. There's got to be something here.

Ava's eyes get wide looking at a page.

AVA

Martha, these pages have specific information on each member of the board. But we still need additional information on the Chippers.

CALIAN

Ava, check this out!

He points at an image, a grotesque mimicry of biological forms intertwined with mechanical precision.

CALIAN

It's.. It's like they modeled these microchips off a parasite, the Horsehair Worm.

MARTHA

Parasite?

CALIAN

Exactly. They engineered them to control the brain electronically through signals and pulses. The three microchips hijack motor functions and override the brain so the controller can take complete control of the host, a.k.a. the Chipper.

Samuel slaps documents on the desk in front them. A glossy marketing brochure.

SAMUEL

They advertised these microchips as the next big advancement in virtual reality. They told volunteers it would be unlike anything they'd ever experienced, all for free, if they signed up to have the microchips installed.

MARTHA

Free setup included.

AVA

Virtual reality, more like virtually enslaving everyone who bought into their lies.

SAMUEL

Exactly. They sold dreams and delivered nightmares.

MARTHA

Nightmares that we're left to navigate.

Ava hands Martha a piece of paper that she reads.

MARTHA

Mind control at the flick of a switch?

AVA

The government and Onakele Enterprises could just turn people into puppets whenever they felt the need.

MARTHA

Volunteers.

AVA

More like victims.

Martha picks up a reports.

MARTHA

DHIA, Ground- breaking Artificial Intelligence System. DHIA. That's the system running the microchips. It's an AI system, Ava. Artificial Intelligence and the government are behind the microchips.

SAMUEL

AI controlled Chippers? Why is it trying to murder us? What'd we do?

AVA

With or without more answers, we need to shut this AI system down, no matter who or what stands in our way. Some things are becoming more important than answers.

Ava squeezed my shoulder, but it differed from her typical consoling touch.

MARTHA

It's too intelligent?

SAMUEL

So, it's intelligent enough to consider us expendable.. I wonder if they lost control of their own creation once it understood why it was created.

AVA  
Just like Frankenstein's monster...

A page catches her attention.

AVA  
Board members. Profiles, pictures...  
everything.

The pages featured formal faces that lacked the dirt, fear,  
and exhaustion we wore. We reached the section labeled  
"Onakele Enterprises Board Members."

SAMUEL  
Monsters in suits.

AVA  
Monsters, we're too late to stop.  
There are a lot of dirt bags  
involved in this. I want to see the  
face of every piece of shit  
responsible for this catastrophe.

MARTHA  
(laughing)  
Check this out, It's like he  
covered two leaves in coffee  
grounds before super gluing them to  
the sides of his lip.

CALIAN  
(laughing)  
Looks like a wet candy bar dragged  
through dog fur.

SAMUEL  
That's one impressive coffee  
filter. Does it filter coffee for  
the entire planet?

MARTHA  
Oh, she'd definitely sue you for  
breathing too loudly.

AVA  
Her glare could probably turn you  
to stone.

They turned the page.

MARTHA  
Wow. Karen really is a 'Karen.'  
It's like they're not even trying  
to hide it anymore.



CALIAN

I bet she threatens zombies with a lawsuit as they chomp her outstretched hand.

AVA

Let's focus. These people... they know how to shut down the AI. We need to shut down the AI to regain a chance at a normal life.

Samuel places a hand on Ava's shoulder.

SAMUEL

It doesn't hurt to enjoy these moments and take a break. We can indulge in a little more fun.

Ava nods and turns the page.

AVA

This guy definitely gives 'intern' vibe.

CALIAN

The enthusiasm of a golden retriever who just discovered he's going to the park.

SAMUEL

Ah, and meet the park owner.

AVA

Next page.

CALIAN

Did you find something?

He and Samuel lean in, their banter replaced by tension.

AVA

Martha... do you see this?  
It's—it's Mom.

CALIAN

Is this a joke? What's going on?

MARTHA

Mom?

SAMUEL

It is her...

CALIAN

Ava, what's going on?

MARTHA  
It's Mom. Head of Research and  
Development for Project DHIA.

Calian and Samuel exchange a glance. Their expressions  
morphed from bewildered to infuriated in a matter of seconds.

SAMUEL  
Your mom...

CALIAN  
Monica Noirytz...

They glared at the girls.

AVA  
Guys, we didn't know

CALIAN  
Didn't know? Ava, Your own mother?  
How could she be a part of  
something that... that devoured the  
world?

AVA  
(to Martha)  
Did you know Mom was involved? That  
this was her job?

MARTHA  
No, I-I didn't. Did you?

AVA  
Even Dad didn't really know what  
she did, just the company name.  
Every time I asked him what Mom did  
for work, he just shrugged and said  
she worked in research and  
development for Onakele  
Enterprises. When I asked what  
exactly she did, he'd blow it off  
and continue doing the dishes or  
whatever he was doing.

The boys exchanged glances. Their anger slowly dissolves into  
a shared sense of bewilderment.

SAMUEL  
Look, either way, we're all stuck  
in the same mess. Let's... let's  
figure this out together.

CALIAN

Right. We still need to locate the shutdown for the AI, no matter who's to blame for creating it.

MARTHA

She did nothing unless it benefited her. Her work..... It was always more about proving how smart she was, how important she was, or how much money she could make. This... all this chaos, it's exactly the grand scheme she'd be a part of.

AVA

She loved her research more than us, more than anything. Always chasing more power, more... The safe. That damned safe she wouldn't let out of her sight, claiming it would make her the most powerful person in the world.

(thinking)

She hid it there. In the hotel, before we met Samuel and...

MARTHA

She said we'd need her alive to find it.

AVA

She couldn't have hidden the safe well with how quickly she came back out of the hotel. I bet I could find it.

MARTHA

Maybe we should take a break,. We've been through a lot. We need to relax for a moment.

The others nodded in agreement, relief flooding the room as shoulders dropped with deep exhales.

AVA

We must find that safe. But we also can't forget what's out there. Those... things.

MARTHA

First things first. We've got a lot to piece together. This Project DHIA, the microchips, our mom's involvement.

AVA

Martha's right. We need to understand everything before making a move. One poor impulse move and they could eat us.

SAMUEL

Then let's make sure we're armed to the teeth

AVA

We need to find that safe. If Mom hid something that important in the hotel, it could be the key to all this. Maybe she literally had a 'shutdown' key.

SAMUEL

Yeah, but the hotel is days away even without Chippers interfering, and we don't even know if the safe is still there. Or we could head straight for Onakele Enterprises. If we can shut down the mainframe, maybe we'll cut the head off the snake, stopping every Chipper.

CALIAN

Easy to say, hard to do, We're talking about infiltrating a high-security corporate building possibly crawling with those things.

AVA

Martha, what do you think?

MARTHA

We need to decide, and whatever we choose, I think we should do it together.

CALIAN

Let's vote then, Majority decides our next move.

SAMUEL

But we're not splitting up. We stick together, no matter what.

AVA

"Alright, let's vote. Where to first? The hotel or Onakele Enterprises?... Martha?

MARTHA

Onakele Enterprises. Samuel?

SAMUEL

Onakele Enterprises. Calian?

CALIAN

I think we should go to the hotel.

AVA

OK, and I think we should head to the hotel, too. A tie. What do we do with a tie, then?"

Calian stares into Ava's eyes with a comforting smile and shoots her a wink.

CALIAN

You know what? Maybe we should just go to the Onakele Enterprises. Like we said, who knows if the safe is still there?

AVA

You're right, Calian. Let's all go to the Onakele Enterprises headquarters.

A shrill, electronic scream pierces the air, followed by a symphony of equally terrifying sounds from just beyond the facility walls.

Samuel and Calian leap into action, guns in hand, charging toward the reception area. The girls follow.

SAMUEL

Behind the desk, now!

The get behind the desk. The Chippers cluster just outside the entry doors, their movements erratic and purposeful all at once.

CALIAN

Think they know we're here?

SAMUEL

"Can't tell. But we can't take chances.

"Stay alert," Ava said. She slid her pistol from her pocket.

"Everybody, just breathe," I whispered,

The Chippers, turn from a churning mass of rage and decay, snapped into an uncharacteristic stillness.

AVA

Look at their heads.

The twenty Chipper snap their necks backward and their faces aimed straight up. A glow emanates from their microchips that casts an eerie, hypnotic blue blanket over the landscape.

MARTHA

Blue... Another upgrade?

SAMUEL

Upgrade or not, this can't be good.

Their microchips flipped to green, and they break formation, sprinting off in random directions.

AVA

Whoever, or whatever, they're after, I'd hate to be in their way.

MARTHA

Let's hope it's not us they're hunting.

CALIAN

Clear. Back to square one," Calian  
But at least we have a moment of  
peace.

MARTHA

We still need a plan to disable  
this AI, DHIA, whatever we need to  
destroy?

AVA

What do you think those Chippers  
took off after? Could they be  
searching for us?

SAMUEL

Maybe they found a new target. A  
large group of survivors could have  
drawn their attention.

AVA

Or maybe, they're being called  
back... by the AI, or something with  
more control over them than we  
realized.

MARTHA

Whatever it is we need to stop it.  
I'm so exhausted of this nightmare  
and it needs to end.

CALIAN (O.S.)

Hey, over here! Looks like we've hit the jackpot.

They crowd around as he steps inside to reveal an open room. It's small but densely packed with military paraphernalia. Racks of guns lined the walls, pistols laid arranged in neat rows, and several shotguns sand all around along with ammunition. Martha sees grenades in a cabinet.

SAMUEL

Niiice. This could change the game.

AVA

Or at least even things up.

SAMUEL

Grab what you can carry. We need to be prepared for anything.

They fill their backpacks with ammunition and fling weapons over their shoulders. Samuel scoops up the grenades.

SAMUEL

Never thought I'd be so happy to see these. Hey Martha, mind carrying these for me?

MARTHA

Of course I can.

AVA

Looks like we've got a fighting chance.

SAMUEL

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We need to prepare with more than just guns. We need food and anything else we can scavenge.

Ava and Calian shoot each other an awkward gaze.

MARTHA

Look at this, It's all here, Our entire terrain... and there—

Her fingers land on a detailed map.

MARTHA

That's where they birthed this nightmare. That's where we might be able to end everything.

SAMUEL

Or where we'll find more trouble.

AVA

Either way, it's our best lead. And we've got to take it.

MARTHA

Plus, we already voted on it.

SAMUEL

Then it's settled. "We head for Onakele Enterprises, end this nightmare, and get back to our normal lives... as much as we can.

MARTHA

We can't just head out blindly. We need to be sharp and more ready than we've ever been.

AVA

Plus, we'll need boats. It's not on our island. It's on one of the other islands.

MARTHA

Seriously? Well, I guess we'll need to scavenge.

SAMUEL

Martha's right.

CALIAN

First off. Have any of you ever been to... Ina Onar Island? I know I haven't. I've never even heard of it. Does it say how far it is?

MARTHA

It doesn't matter how far it is or how hard it'll be to find a boat. No matter what it takes, we'll find that city. And when we do...

AVA

"First things first, we stock up. Food, water, medical supplies, a boat. We make sure we're prepared for what awaits us on that island.

MARTHA

Right.



CALIAN

We stock up first, then we battle  
the Boss Chipper.

MARTHA

But first we need rest for the next  
part of our journey.

They create makeshift sleeping areas.

THE NEXT MORNING

Samuel wakes Martha up. Ava and Calian are gone. Were they  
taken. She turns over and finds a note. Ava's handwriting.

TO BE CONTINUED

FADE TO BLACK.