

Drag Me Down

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A tale of revenge and redemption.

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Chapter 1: In The Beginning

A man works in the fields, a wrench held tight in his grease covered hand. He grunts as he struggles to turn a rusty bolt, attempting to open the side panel of the control box for the compound's irrigation system. It has recently stopped working, but must be repaired if the compound is to continue farming their own courtyard. It is early spring in the year twenty sixty-one, and the twenty-five-year-old human has worked tirelessly as his father's apprentice, since he had hit puberty. He applies heat with a torch, pulling down hard on the bolt and finally breaking it loose.

He stumbles back, steadying himself. He wipes his brow with his left forearm, the only one that is remotely clean. He takes off the cover and begins to examine the inner workings of the control box, but knows that he is out of his league. He wants to ask his father for help, but knows that he will simply tell him to find the problem and solve it, before walking away. "A man looks at the situation, realizes what needs to be done, and then does it to the best of his ability" his father would say. The man chuckles quietly to himself as he starts to work on the control box, taking the face plate off and looking inside.

"How's it coming, Kyle?" A voice calls out to him,

He turns around, seeing his father approaching. His father, like him, is a Caucasian man with wheat colored hair and dark blue eyes. His father, Trenton, is the compound's resident mechanic and electronics expert, having worked for

a large corporation as an engineer and I.T. guy before the world's collapse. He walks past his son and peeks inside the control box, as though he already knows what is wrong with it.

"It's fine, Dad. I'll make it work." Kyle confidently boasts.

"I know you will." Trent pats his son on the shoulder. "Don't stay out too long. Dinner will be ready soon, and your mother and Lara won't like it if you're late."

"Okay, Dad." Kyle replies.

His father walks away, leaving him to work and solve the problem on his own. Kyle turns back to the exposed intestines of the device, not even sure what he is looking at. As he works, he reflects on the world that he lives in. He was just old enough to remember the world before, and how it came to be this way. It wasn't always such a hard life. People often had more than they needed, or even wanted. Now, having everything that you need is living the high life.

He sighs as he remembers "The Ending", the nickname often given to that fateful year when everything changed. It occurred in the fall of the year twenty forty-five, when Kyle was barely ten years old. A harsh winter in the year twenty forty-four, and a very dry summer immediately following, had sparked a myriad of natural disasters all over the world, both figuratively and literally. Frozen and burst

pipelines, crop failures, landslides and forest fires were all commonplace. Though the entire world felt the effects, North America, Europe and Africa took the brunt of the natural assault.

During that year, the increasing shortage of fossil fuels had caused inflation to rise exponentially. Compounded with the natural disasters that had only sought to make scarce resources even more valuable, it soon became too expensive for the average man to feed his family. Hyper-inflation occurred; a full shopping cart once cost three or four hundred dollars, but now cost seven or eight thousand. Around the same time that world governments began a system of rationing, the crime grew out of control. Like a match dropped in a dry field, it swept the world, burning everything away.

Unable to continue under the weight of its own debt, the world economy collapsed. No longer able or willing to foot the bill, The United States of America and Great Britain ceased all funding, and the United Nations dissolved overnight; every nation was left to their own devices. Some fared marginally better than others, while the majority simply ceased to exist as governing bodies. The catastrophe left the more impoverished nations with only one choice; war was all they had left, and many of them were civil.

Even the countries that could handle the pressures of the copious disasters, couldn't prevent an invasion from their hungry and desperate neighbors. Not a single first world nation came out intact. Many devolved into city states, with local governing bodies constantly disputing the right to rule over the masses of weak and sickly peons. Internal and external wars wiped out entire country's populations, as did the diseases brought on by worldwide famine. By twenty forty-six, as "The Ending" began to settle, the world population of nearly seven billion, was soon reduced to a humbled two billion. The United States alone lost nearly seventy percent of the nearly four hundred million that had once resided there.

Kyle sighs he finds burnt wires inside of the box, attached to a panel that looks rather important. Taking a spool of spare wire from his tools, he prepares to swap the old for the new. Without visible lights, he fails to check the current running through the box. As his wire cutters split the first set of burnt wires, he receives a nasty jolt of electricity, dropping the cutters on the ground and exclaiming loudly in pain. He spins around, his shoulder length blonde hair swishing through the air as he grips his hand.

"Are you alright?" A man asks him.

"Yeah... I'm fine..." Kyle grumbles.

"Let me turn of the power first, Kyle." The man laughs.

With a flip of a switch at the back of the board, the experienced farmer cuts the power to the control box. Kyle quickly goes back to work, swapping the wires. Once he is done, the man turns the power back on. The lights blink on the box and the scheduled spray of the field begins. Kyle sighs with relief as he places the face back on the box, and then the protective cover.

“You did it! Thanks!” The farmer applauds.

Kyle collects his tools and rushes back home. Moving quickly through the courtyard of the compound, he dashes to the other side, where his family has residence in building three. The compound looks like a box of four rectangular connecting warehouses or factories, with a large courtyard in the middle that was once used as a paved lounging area for the workers. The survivors have since broken and removed the concrete, as they had done shortly after welding thick plates of steel over all of the lower windows of all four buildings, turning the compound into a self-sustaining fortress. It has been their home for well over twelve years.

Kyle enters building three and heads for the apartment where his parents live, adjacent to his own that he shares with his girlfriend Lara and his dog. She is a pale, twenty-two-year-old brunette with emerald eyes, that he had been

seeing exclusively for barely six months. His dog, Shane, is a three-year-old brindle and white pit bull terrier, one of the most friendly and energetic domesticated animals still alive in this world. Kyle had raised Shane since he was a puppy. He opens the door with an old red rag, careful not to leave grease on the handle of his parent's door.

As soon as it swings open a few inches, Shane shoves his face through the crack and pounces on his best friend, his front paws reaching up to his mid-chest. Kyle laughs as he holds his greasy hands up high in the air. Shane barks at him as his tail sways happily, as if demanding to know why he wasn't allowed to go with him. Lara walks up, taking Shane by his old red collar and pulling him back. She leans in and kisses Kyle tenderly on the lips before letting him enter.

He greets them all as he enters, quickly standing before the kitchen sink. His father flips a switch, turning on the small water pump beneath the counter so that Kyle can wash his hands before dinner. Kyle looks around, but doesn't see his mother anywhere.

"Where's Mom at?" He asks his father.

"Someone got their hand caught in a bullet press; split a nice gash, so she's cleaning and stitching them right now." Trent replies.

As if on cue, Jana, Kyle's mother, enters the apartment. Small smears of fresh blood stain her faded medical gown that once was teal, but now looks like a faded grey with patches of brown crust all over it. She was an X-Ray technician before The Ending, and had studied nursing for a few years, becoming certified. She is the closest thing that the compound has to a resident doctor.

"Hi, Son!" She exclaims.

She walks toward the kitchen sink, as Shane greets her in a similar fashion. Standing beside her son, they take turns washing their hands. Kyle scrubs off the black grease as his mother washes away the red blood. They take their seats around the table as Trent leads the family in a prayer, as was the family's practice. Before The Ending, they were devout Catholics; surviving the last fifteen years of hardship, twelve of which were in this very compound, had only strengthened their faith in The Almighty. Their prayer complete, the family eats their humble meal of poultry, corn and beans, all raised and grown within the courtyard.

"So I was thinking about the world before. I realized that I could barely remember it anymore." Kyle begins.

"Oh? It's probably best that you don't." Jana remarks.

"Was it so bad?" Lara asks.

“It was decadent and wasteful.” Jana replies.

“It was interesting though!” Trent begins.

“I suppose it was.” Jana murmurs, cutting into her dinner.

“I remember that a Voeldahn was running for president! I was going to vote for him, too. A libertarian with a sixty-five percent approval rating was already enough, but Voeldahn to boot? We never had a Voeldahn president before.” Trent chuckles.

“Is that reason enough to vote for them, just because he was Voeldahn?” Jana poses.

“Well no, but he *was* libertarian, and a nationalist. I liked him. Being a Voeldahn just spiced it up a bit.” Trent laughs.

“I’ve never seen a Voeldahn.” Lara thinks aloud.

“It used to be a nearly fifty-fifty split between humans and Voeldahn. I even knew a few humans at work who were married to them, and my boss was Voeldahn, with a human wife and a couple of kids. The Ending changed a lot of things though. Most of them keep to themselves, if you can even find them; humans don’t visit their villages, and they often don’t visit humans either, not like they would be very warmly received if they did.” Trent explains.

The conversation slowly dies down as the family eats quietly for a moment. Shane sits by Kyle, who regularly hand feeds his dog choice pieces of meat.

“You know, we could just get him a bowl.” Jana comments.

“Yeah, but Shane likes it better like this, don’t you boy?” Kyle replies, petting Shane on the head.

Shane barks, as if answering back.

“I’m glad that spring is finally here.” Lara begins, cutting through the silence.

“Yeah. Winters in Michigan aren’t very pleasant, are they?” Trent answers.

“One thing I remember from when I was little was you and Mom always talking about moving, but you never did.” Kyle says.

“Yes, why didn’t we, honey?” Jana asks, staring at her husband.

“I don’t know. I guess we just couldn’t ever leave, no matter how much we thought we wanted too.” He answers.

“Says you...” Jana chuckles.

As they finish their meals, Kyle and Lara hug his parents good-bye. Opening the main door, Shane follows Kyle, walking loyally by his side. They enter their apartment next door as night falls, and prepare for bed.

Chapter 2: The Attack

Early the next morning, Kyle is shaken awake by Lara, who frantically calls his name. Shane barks in the background as Kyle sits up, groggy and disoriented. He rolls out of bed as his knees hit the floor. His father barges in, handing Lara a small twenty-two caliber rifle. He reaches out and helps Kyle from the floor. His hair wild, and dressed in only his faded undershirt and briefs, his father presses an old Chinese SKS rifle to his chest.

“What the hell is going on?” Kyle asks, blinking hard as he struggles to wake up.

“Raiders...” Trent grumbles angrily.

He racks the bolt of his own AK platform rifle as he rushes into the hall. Lara charges her little rifle while Kyle throws on some black jeans and a dark orange t-shirt. He puts on his black leather vest and takes a small bundle of 7.62x39mm ammunition, placing the rounds into his front vest pockets. He yanks back on the handle of the bolt of his rifle, readying the weapon. He rushes outside and down the hall as men and women move to ladders that climb up to the rooftops.

He slings his rifle on his back and begins the ascent, climbing up the ten meters toward the roof. Once he reaches the peak, he sees his father alongside dozens of men. They take aim, firing at the whooping raiders, who sound as though they are at a party, before ducking back down. Kyle rushes over to his father, brushing his blonde hair from his face before bringing up his rifle. He looks over the edge of welded plate steel, some of which is a half-inch thick, and attached like raised stones on a castle wall, used as cover from just such an attack.

He takes aim at a group of raiders, who immediately see his head emerging from cover and promptly open fire. He quickly ducks down, not even firing a shot as the rounds zing past his head. Kyle had only ever experience two assaults on the compound, the first when he was barely fourteen, and the other two years ago; in the first, he merely held a pistol and guarded his mother in the safety of their steel encased apartment. During the second, the raiders broke off and fled in the first few minutes. These raiders are very different, and don't seem afraid to die. Are they that desperate?

He takes a deep breath, steadying his shaking nerves as he looks back over the barrier. He sees that there are easily thirty raiders, about half the population that lives inside the compound, and some of them look strange; swaying tails and pointed ears, with elongated faces and

fur in wildly varying patterns. He pauses when he sees a raider who looks a lot like Shane, but with flowing brown hair like a human's. These must be the Voeldahn! Like his girlfriend Lara, Kyle had never seen one to his recollection.

A round bounces off the barrier just below the edge, centered over his heart. The ping of the round snaps him out of his daze. He takes aim and fires, carefully squeezing the trigger as though he were outside the compound and hunting game with his father. He points his rifle at a group of raiders. He fires a round, and then a second. A spray of red mist flies from a human who drops motionless on the ground. He lowers the rifle in shock; he has claimed his first life. The raiders swiftly return fire. He raises the rifle and lowers himself, resting the foregrip on the barrier as he continues the fight, shooting round after round until the bolt locks back.

He hits at least one more raider before running dry, quickly dropping behind the barrier as he reaches into his vest pockets for his spare ammunition. Without stripper clips for the rifle, he is forced to load each round through the receiver and into the internal magazine, one at a time. A sudden blast, much louder than the gunfire, causes him to shutter, dropping a few rounds. He leans over and collects the rounds as his father quickly grabs his shoulders, dragging him away from the barrier. Another loud boom makes everyone drop to the ground.

“He has a fifty cal!” A survivor screams.

Boom, boom, boom. The rifle fires round after armor piercing round, but these don’t aim at the fighters on the roof. Soon, the raider is out of ammunition. The fighters quickly aim over the wall, shooting at the horde that seems to protect the man with the rifle that’s as tall as he is. The shooter lies prone on a small hill with his old Barrett M82A1 rifle mounted on a bipod. Kyle takes careful aim, firing a round and striking the shooter in the head. A chunk of skull flies away as the body rolls down the hill. Another raider with a swishing tail moves for the rifle, but Kyle kills him as well.

As a third tries to take it, Kyle fires several rounds, striking the scope of the rifle and leaving it without a means to properly aim. He had always been an excellent shot, and using this pattern rifle, he often hunts wild game for the compound; he rarely misses his mark. The raiders seem to abandon the weapon as they break away, running for any nearby cover that they can find. Some duck behind old logs, others lie in small ditches, while a few seem to run away altogether. After several more minutes of fighting, the raiders who aren’t dead or seriously wounded begin following the others who are quick to retreat.

The men all cheer in victory; Kyle raises his rifle and roars. He turns back, grinning wide as he looks for his father. His elation quickly dissipates as he sees Trent

leaning against a barrier, one of the survivors tying a belt tightly around his left arm, while another survivor ties a cord around his right thigh. Kyle races up to his father and examines his wounds, setting his rifle aside. They are serious injuries, and from the amount of blood, he wonders if an artery were severed somewhere.

“Listen to me, Kyle...” Trent weakly begins.

“Don’t talk. You’re going to be just fine, Dad!” Kyle barks as tears well in his eyes.

“I just want you to know that I’m proud of you. You’re a good man. I always knew you would be... I just wanted you to hear it from me, before your mother gets to beat me to it.” Trent quietly chuckles, resting a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Dad...” Kyle murmurs.

Trent closes his eyes as he quickly loses consciousness, his hand going limp and falling to his side. Kyle begins to panic as a survivor checks his pulse.

“He’s alive, but barely. If we can get to work on him right now, he might have a chance. Get Jana!” He yells to Kyle.

With a nod, Kyle dashes to the ladder. He quickly scrambles down to the ground floor as he runs back to his

parent's apartment, where his mother, Lara and Shane should be waiting for him. He stops when he sees a large hole the door, about a half-inch in diameter. His heart drops as he rushes inside. He calls out to his mother and his girlfriend, but hears no answer. Shane dashes out from around a corner, trembling as he pushes his body against Kyle's legs. Kyle leans down and pets Shane, comforting the dog.

"Hey, where's my Mom, boy? Is Lara in here?" He softly asks his dog.

Shane barks, and that is when Kyle sees it; a blood smear on Shane's chin. He stands as Shane runs around a corner. Following his dog, he stops dead in his tracks. He drops to his knees as his eyes well with tears, blurring his vision.

"Oh God, no... Please no..." He mumbles.

There, on the floor before him are two bodies, and two more holes from the fifty-caliber rifle. His mother's body lies headless, slumped against the wall on the opposite side of the welded metal barriers. Lara lies before his mother, with a gaping hole in her chest from the same rifle. For security purposes, bullet slits were installed in each apartment on the ground floor, allowing the residents to fire from cover if

need be. Some are high up, requiring a table or kitchen counter to be used as a perch.

As Kyle looks over the scene it is clear to him what had happened; Lara stood on the kitchen counter, firing at the raiders. The shooter with the fifty-caliber Barrett took a few shots at her. A round ripped through her abdomen and struck his mother's head, who stood near the wall behind Lara, killing them both instantly with a single pull of the trigger. Kyle cries in the room for what seems like an eternity, while Shane sits by his side, trying to comfort his friend. After a while, survivors enter the apartment. They begin to speak, but stop dead in their tracks as they look at the corpses lying before them on the floor.

"Kyle... Your father..." One quietly begins.

"Don't say a word... I don't want to hear it." Kyle snaps.

"But Kyle..." The other continues.

"I fucking know already... I saw his wounds..." Kyle hangs his head.

He knows that his father had died from his injuries, but he couldn't stand to hear the words. The only one left is his faithful dog Shane. He pets Shane's head as he looks up at Kyle with comforting eyes.

“So now what?” Kyle asks.

“We can go after them... I was on the roof when it started. I got a good look at the leaders.” The first survivor answers.

“Alright... As soon as we take care of the fallen, we’ll finish this.” Kyle grumbles.

He stands and turns back to the men, walking past them as he exits the apartment. One of the survivors grabs his arm.

“Wait. Is this really what we should be doing?” He asks Kyle.

“What do you mean?” Kyle yanks his arm away from him.

“I mean, they already left, and this won’t bring anyone back. Maybe we should let them go.” The survivor continues.

“The fuck?!” Kyle yells.

“I’m just saying, would they want us to go and do this?” He asks, pointing to the bodies on the floor.

“They’re dead... And I’m going to make them pay, even if it kills me.” Kyle growls.

He pushes past the survivors and out of the door, heading back to the ladder where Trent’s corpse, and his

rifle wait for him. He knows that he is going to need his rifle very soon.

Chapter 3: Aftermath

They bring the bodies of the dead out into the courtyard. Alongside Kyle's mother, father, and girlfriend, are six survivors who were killed in the struggle. Of the nine who died, five had considerable knowledge of medicine, mechanics, electronics, plumbing, and farming. Their loss is insurmountable, and will be felt for years, if not decades. They burn the bodies of the dead atop pyres, a custom that many survivors began as a result of the diseases that ravaged them during The Ending. Further, it is their custom for each pyre to be built and lit by the relative of the dead; should none exist, the entire group helps.

Kyle had to work tirelessly, and was soon aided by the others, who took pity on him; his loss was the greatest among them. They stand in silence as they watch the bodies burn away, leaving nothing but ashes as bits of bone. Shane sits by Kyle's feet, watching silently, occasionally whimpering as he smells the burning flesh with his powerful nose. The fires burn throughout the night, but by night's end, the sun gazes over the horizon, watching as the men load their weapons and prepare for battle.

The watchman who saw the raiders coming, was shot at before he could get the word out, but with his binoculars he spotted a group of four males who seemed to lead the others. One was a Hispanic human with long black dreadlocks, while another was a Caucasian human with a tall mohawk dyed red. The third leader is a Voeldahn with solid white fur, canine features, and short hair that was also dyed red. The fourth, who seemed to lead the other three, is a Voeldahn with orange and cream tabby fur, feline features, and shoulder length hair that was twisted into primitive locks and also dyed red. They wonder if these men are among the dead outside, but the watchman is certain he saw them retreat before the others.

As the morning sun rises high in the sky, they leave the compound and begin checking the bodies outside, collecting their weapons and ammunition, while piling them atop each other in a grim mound of flesh, fur and blood. None of the bodies match the description that the watchman gave them, though some have dyed red hair. Is that the marking of some tribe that lives nearby? A colony of raiders perhaps? Returning to the compound, the posse gather their weapons, making sure they have quality firearms, ample ammunition and water, and enough food for a short journey. Twenty men and women opt to join Kyle, eager to destroy the raiders.

With the help of a survivor who is skilled in tracking, they are quick to pick up the trail. The raiders marched a

clear path through the nearby secondary forest, which had sprouted in the absence of human and Voeldahn interference. Broken branches and shuffled ground act as nature's own neon sign, pointing toward the bloodthirsty raiders. After several hours of walking, they creep up on a camp that lies in the basin of a dried-up river. There, seated around a campfire are the four men that Kyle has been looking for, the ones responsible for all of his pain and suffering. He watches them through binoculars.

Shane lies down beside Kyle, who is prone on the ground, examining their camp through the lenses. The men are leading a considerable force. Though they killed a score of raiders in the attack, claiming over two lives for every death, there are still over a dozen healthy raiders at the camp, excluding the leaders. They march around, weapons in hand, as though waiting for someone to pop out at them at any moment. Looking over the camp, Kyle sees a blind spot near the southeastern corner.

Motioning to the orders, he points at the blind spot. It is a crevasse between a large, split boulder that juts out from the hillside. Kyle assumes it is booby trapped, as there are no guards near it. If they slip through the crevasse and sneak to a nearby fallen log, at least a half-dozen men could shoot through the entire camp as though it were a practice range; there would be no escape for the raiders within. Outnumbering the raiders, and with a powerful resolve, they silently move for the boulder, slithering their

way around the edge of the hillside. Even Shane seems to stay low.

A survivor reaches the top of the crack first, and begins sliding down. Kyle attempts to call out to him, but his whispers warning of potential traps go unheeded. A small wire is pulled as the survivor rushes past the opening of the crevasse. A grenade flops out of an empty tin can, the lever flying away automatically, as the pin had already been removed. Taking cover, the grenade explodes, throwing fragments of hot death into the survivor's back. The raiders all aim at the crevasse and open fire as though on cue.

They know that they have no choice now. The posse lies prone on the edge of the hill, firing down at the raiders who focus solely on the crack in the boulder. They are surprised by the hail of gunfire that washes over them like fiery rain. Several raiders fall in an instant. The leaders seem to panic as they rush off, running through the camp and towards a large rock that easily conceals the four of them. Shane runs off, sprinting through the crevasse and emerging from the boulder.

He pounces on a Voeldahn raider, biting hard on his throat. He yanks his head violently from side to side as he tears out a chunk of flesh, killing the raider. A comrade takes aim and fires. Shane whimpers as he pounces on the shooter, biting onto his arm as Kyle panics, rushing through the crevasse as fast as he can. The raider fires again,

killing the dog, before a rifle round tears through his neck. Kyle aims the rifle, firing several more times as the raider coughs up blood, lying on his back in the dirt.

Several other members of the posse emerge from the crack and route the raiders, quickly killing them to a man. Kyle holds his fallen dog, already dead from a gunshot wound to the head. He cradles Shane in his arms and rocks back and forth as a rage he has never felt before grows within him. His heart burns as though it were drenched in gasoline and set ablaze. He has finally lost everything, and he knows it. He turns to the boulder, setting Shane's body down as he takes up the empty rifle.

He stares at the boulder with fiery eyes as he loads round after round into the magazine of his SKS. He hears a noise from behind the boulder and quickly inserts the last few rounds in his hand, pulling back and releasing the bolt as he primes his rifle to fire. He takes aim as the four leaders ride away on four horses. How did they come across so many horses? He knows that he can't let them escape; not just to satisfy his vengeance, but because he knows that these men will only do this to someone else.

His rage is intense, infecting his body like a virus. It causes his hands to tremor as he struggles to take aim. His trigger finger jerks instead of gently squeezing, and he misses his first few shots. As the riders gain distance, he lowers the rifle, takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly as

he slides the sight to adjust for the range. He takes aim again and squeezes the trigger. He strikes one of the horse's hind quarters, causing it to fall and throw off the rider. The others quickly pick him up.

Kyle pulls the trigger, but in his haste, he did not notice that his rifle had jammed; the bolt squeezes a spent shell casing between the mouth of the barrel and the bolt. He quickly reaches out, places the blade of his hand against the receiver, and pulls back towards him. He removes the stovepipe jam with ease and racks the slide, but by the time he takes aim, the riders are even further away, as is the man he was about to fire upon, sitting behind another man, riding two-up on the horse.

"Fuck!" Kyle screams, throwing the rifle down onto the ground. "God damn you sons of bitches!" He screams, pointing a trembling finger at the fleeing leaders. "God damn you all to Hell!"

One of the survivors carefully approaches Kyle, resting a hand on his shoulder. Kyle spins around, throwing off the hand. He glares at the man.

"At least we got the rest. They'll never come back after this." He says to Kyle.

“That doesn’t make this right! Not by a longshot!” Kyle growls.

“We fought them, and we won. Plus, we only lost one person in the fight! They lost over a dozen!” A second warrior remarks.

Kyle grabs the man by his shirt, pulling him close.

“Two! We lost TWO!” He roars, pointing a finger at Shane’s corpse. “They killed my *entire family*, and those mother fuckers are going to burn...”

The warrior holds up his hands as though surrendering. The first grabs Kyle’s wrist, pulling his hand off the man’s shirt.

“Easy. It’s all over now.” He says softly to the enraged Kyle.

“We can all go home now...” The second adds.

“Home...” Kyle tragically laughs. “*You* can go home. Let me get what I need from the dead, then you can take care of the rest. I’m not going back to the compound. My home died with the others.”

“Kyle...” The warrior frowns.

He collects his rifle and walks by the two, quickly searching the bodies for ammunition, weapons, and supplies. The entire posse don't dare disturb him. They understand his pain, and won't stand in his way. They relinquish the food that they have, as well as a spare metal water bottle and an earth brown M-1936 style Musette bag. Kyle fills the little pack with everything he thinks he will need. He claims three handguns, a Kahr CT9 pistol, a Smith and Wesson 5904 pistol, and an H&R 732 revolver, along with a quantity of ammunition for all three. He collects over one hundred rounds of ammunition for his SKS rifle, loading his vest pockets with as much as they can hold, placing the rest in the pack.

As the posse collects the remaining supplies and piles the dead haphazardly, Kyle builds a little pyre, before lovingly placing Shane atop it and setting it ablaze, as he did with the rest of his family. He sits before the pyre, staring at the flames as he faces the direction that the raiders had fled too. Though many want to wish him well, his rage is so intense that they fear approaching him, even announced. They set the corpses alight with several torches, letting the raiders burn to ashes. They take one last look back at Kyle, who sits at the small pyre, staring into the horizon. He grips the rifle tightly as it sits across his lap. This is something that he will have to do alone.

Chapter 4: Allies

As night falls in the dry river basin, the pyre begins to burn out. Not skilled in tracking, like some of the others from the compound, he scrambles to follow the visible trail. By sheer coincidence, the night has a full moon, allowing him to slowly follow their trail, even in the darkness. He walks, pushed by a resolve that he has never felt before. As the hours pass, he becomes exhausted, but never stops moving. For a moment, he wonders if he has been walking even through brief naps; he cannot be certain he hasn't.

The daylight creeps over the horizon, warming the land and his body, which had previously been heated solely by his constant motion. He can't be sure how far he has come. He turns back and doesn't see anything familiar behind him. He is certainly miles away from the compound. He takes out a compass from his pocket, checking his bearings. He has never swayed from the trail, which moves southwest in a nearly straight line. He walks through the open fields of rural Michigan, following the trail around patches of trees. As the sun reaches its zenith, he spots something in the distance. His tired eyes and sore muscles feel briefly rejuvenated.

Racing up to the object, he sees that it is in fact three; the corpses of the horses that the raiders had pushed too their limits. All shot in the head and left to rot in the fields. Kyle briefly panics, for he knows that they are now on foot, and the horses had left a considerable trail to follow. Can

he keep up with the men whose softer tracks are all that he has to go by? He doesn't have much of a choice, except to return to his former home empty handed. Even after he kills them all, he isn't sure that he can ever go back; sleeping alone in a bed that he once shared with Lara and Shane. He looks fervently for any sign of the men.

His effort is rewarded with the sign of boot prints heading in the same southwestern direction. He races to catch up to the men, knowing that they have a considerable head start. His legs grow wobbly and his side feels as though it is being clamped in a vice, but his hatred and thirst for revenge give him the strength to keep moving. He sees a building in the distance, never slowing his pace. He brings up his rifle and aims at the roof of the barn, in case the raiders have claimed it and are waiting for him. He approaches the barn and moves around the building as he hears sounds coming from within.

"No! Stop!" A female yells.

"Ow! Stop fighting, you fucking bitch." A male growls.
"Take it like a good whore!"

Kyle has an idea of what is going on inside; his blood boils as he rushes through the partially open door. Before him is a human, struggling with a Voeldahn woman. He can see her digitigrade feet, with four large toes crowned with black claws, as she kicks and wriggles beneath the man. At

her feet lies an object wrapped in a red cloth. The man's back faces him, but he has long black dreadlocks and tanned skin, like a Hispanic human. He holds his erection in his hand as he holds the girl down with his other arm, poised to forcibly insert himself into her. Kyle doesn't give him the chance, quickly firing a single shot.

He cries out in pain as he falls over, a round ripping into his back. He struggles to grab a gun in his boot. Kyle shoots the man's leg, breaking the bone as he rushes up. Kyle kicks the broken leg as the man screams in agony. The girl curls up in a ball as she cries, covering her ears as Kyle jams the hot barrel into the man's face, burning his cheek.

"You had this coming!" Kyle barks before pulling the trigger.

Brain matter and bits of skull explode from the back of the man's head as he slumps dead on the ground, quickly urinating on himself as his body instantly shuts down. Kyle takes a few deep breaths and grins at the sight of what he has just done. One down, and three more to go. He hears the girl's cries, and his anger subsides. He feels his heart weighing heavy as he turns back to her. She looks at him in utter terror, as though he were another raider. He quickly sets down his rifle, holding out his hands.

“I’m not going to hurt you, miss. I came here for him, and his friends.” He says softly.

He looks the girl over as she slides back from him, her body void of all clothing, except for a few strips that are left dangling from her shoulders and right arm; they must have been ripped from her by the now dead would-be rapist. She has a distinctly feline appearance, with a short and rounded snout, black nose, short but pointy ears, and her paw-like feet. Her human hands are tipped with stubby black claws and grip her considerable bust, shielding it from his view. She has a long tail with bushy fur, and the fur on her body seems thicker as well, though not overly so.

The fur that covers her body is primarily dark grey, with light grey on the balls of her feet, belly, chest, and the front of her neck. As she sits up, her tail swishes. It is tipped with a black spot that covers a couple of inches or so, and he can also see a single black stripe that moves from the tip and along her tail toward her back. He looks around and finds some torn clothes, before stumbling across a blanket. He sets the blanket down before her so that she may cover herself. She stands and turns away, her back facing him as she wraps the blanket around her.

He can briefly see that the black stripe does indeed move through the tail and climbs up her back, reaching to the back of her neck. She is about five feet and seven inches tall, only a few inches shorter than he is, and has

long hair that reaches to the bottom of her shoulder blades. Kyle suddenly realizes that her hair is dyed red, like the human with the mohawk. She is petite, but with an athletic build, probably weighing about one hundred and twenty-five pounds. She turns back to him, a hand clasped over her chest. She nervously looks him over as he steps back, sitting on a bale of hay, leaving the rifle at her feet. He is too exhausted to care.

“What’s your name?” He wearily asks.

“I’m Cassandra McKraken. People just call me Cass. Thank you for saving me, mister?”

“Kyle... Just Kyle.” He says as he closes his eyes.

She takes up the rifle and holds it for a moment.

“You killed him.” She murmurs.

“He was... Bad.” Kyle slowly replies. “Hurt me. Tried to rape you... He had it coming.”

She quickly closes the barn door, latching it shut.

“Red hair...”

“Huh?” She turns back to Kyle.

“Red hair... Like the others.” He groans.

He slips into unconsciousness, dreaming of a fire that rages around him. It creeps closer as he struggles to escape, seeing only the skeletons of his family just beyond the inferno. A hand reaches out and touches him, grabbing his shoulder as he screams. He is jolted awake by Cassandra resting a hand on his shoulder and the other on his forehead, checking for a fever. She moves back, startled by his sudden outburst.

“I’m sorry... I was having a bad dream.” He quickly apologizes.

“It’s alright. It’s over now.” She smiles warmly.

He looks over to her, gazing at her emerald green eyes. She is now wearing clothes of a simple pair of dark brown pants and a faded blue button-up shirt.

“Are you alright?” He asks her.

“I’m fine. You got here before he could really do anything to me. I’m grateful for that.” She nods.

“Anytime... Nice outfit.” He chuckles.

“It’s all I could find!” She innocently replies. “You passed out pretty fast, but you don’t seem to have a fever. How long were you awake?” She asks, sitting beside him.

“Almost two days... I didn’t sleep much after the funeral, and we hunted his boys down all of yesterday.” He begins.

“Funeral? We?” She raises a brow.

“Yeah... A group of thirty-something raiders attacked the fortress that my family and I have been living at for about twelve years... Killed nine of us, including my mother, father, and my girlfriend.” He continues.

“I’m sorry.” She sincerely replies, placing a hand over her chest.

“We gave them a good fight and they took off running. A bunch of us got together to hunt down the survivors. During that second fight, they killed my dog too, so now I’m alone.” He finishes, breathing a melancholy sigh.

“They killed everyone but you?” She asks in surprise.

“No. I just can’t go back home. No one will be there waiting for me... Anyway... Our watchman said that this guy, and three others were leading the whole thing.”

“Three others?” She repeats.

“Yeah... All I want to do is make the other three pay.” Kyle comments.

She sits beside him in silence for a moment as Kyle looks around. He notes that it seems to be twilight outside. He turns back to Cass and looks her over.

“Why do you have red hair?” He suddenly asks.

“It’s a tribal thing.” She shrugs.

“I see... Three of the four had it. Maybe you know them?” He presses her.

“No... Four men attacked my convoy not far from here. We were visiting another Voeldahn tribe when two humans and two Voeldahn came out of nowhere. Three of them had red hair, and I didn’t know any of them. A lot of tribes near lake Michigan dye their hair red; mine isn’t the only one.” She explains defensively.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that... Nevermind.” Kyle lowers his head regretfully.

“It’s okay...” She murmurs.

“So how did you get here?” He asks.

“They killed everyone in my convoy, but Vern... He...” Her voice quivers as she pauses.

Kyle looks over, seeing the sadness on her face, tears welling in her eyes. He reaches out a hand, resting it on her shoulder. She turns back, glaring angrily at him as he pulls his hand away. He holds it up, silently apologizing. She grits her teeth as the pain emerges, cascading from her eyes and running down and around her snout. She leans in, crying silently as she rests her head on Kyle’s shoulder. He slowly places a hand at her far shoulder, holding her comfortably as she weeps.

She reaches out a hand, gripping his arm tightly as she trembles. Kyle can barely contain his own emotions as Cassandra releases hers; they both feel the stabbing pain of loss. Though he struggles to fight it, a single tear runs down his cheek, landing atop her snout and gaining her attention. She looks up at her rescuer and sniffles. He wipes the tears from her face, flashing a gentle but forced smile.

“Everything is going to be okay.” He says softly to her.

“Okay...” She nods.

She sits back up, pulling away from Kyle’s grip. She wipes the remaining tears from her face. She sniffles again and takes a deep breath, ready to continue her story.

“Well, a man I knew well did his best to protect me while I escaped. I was carrying something very important to my tribe, and I have the least experience fighting. I saw Ver... I saw the man fall, and kept running. The other three didn’t know what I had and told the man to let me go, but I heard him say that he ‘wanted to play some more’. He chased me into this barn, where you found me only moments later. I know that once he was done with me, he would have killed me. You saved me life.” Cassandra continues.

“It’s alright, Cassandra. No one deserves what was happening to you. I think I did what anyone else would have done.”

“I doubt that. And please... Call me Cass...” She remarks.

“Okay Cass... Cass McKraken... That’s the coolest sounding name I’ve heard in a long time.” He smiles.

Cass briefly giggles.

“What is your last name?” She asks.

“I... I actually don’t remember it. I was barely ten when The Ending happened, and for the last fifteen years, my parents never said it.” He admits.

“Barely ten? So, you’re twenty-six?” She asks.

“Five.”

“I see... You’re two years older than me.” She comments.

“How long have I been asleep?” He asks.

“All day and most of the night. The sun will be up soon. I got hungry and ate some of your food. I’m sorry.” She replies, lowering her head.

“That’s alright.” He waves a hand dismissively.

“So, what will you do now?” She turns to him.

“I’ll finish what they started...”

He looks back at her, noting her solemn expression. She seems somewhat meek, and he quickly realizes that he can't walk away.

"I can't leave you out here alone, but I won't stop hunting them... So... If your people can get me some supplies for my trip, I'll help you get back home, along with whatever it is you were carrying." He offers.

"Okay!" She chirps.

She doesn't want to walk back by herself, untrained and with few supplies of her own. This human is her best chance at survival, and she would appreciate the company. Cassandra builds a small fire pit as Kyle moves the icy corpse from the barn, dragging it out and to the back. He checks him for supplies, finding a small, stainless steel Sig Sauer P232 in thirty-two caliber tucked into his boot, along with a handful of ammunition in his pockets. Returning to the barn, the two sit quietly and eat a simple meal from Kyle's pack; he willingly shares with her, without her asking.

He presents her with the little Sig handgun, letting her keep it for personal protection. She silently accepts the weapon. She looks at it in her hand, holding a piece of deer jerky in the other. She sets the pistol down and turns to Kyle.

“Kyle... Are you sure you should do this?” She breaks the silence.

“Do what? Give you a gun?” He raises an eyebrow.

“No... I mean... Killing the other men won’t bring back your loved ones. It won’t bring back mine either...”

He looks at the small fire that sits between them. His eyes turn up to her, as he stares coldly back at her. She feels the urge to shudder as his icy blue eyes stare right through her.

“I know it won’t, but it might make me feel better.” He remarks.

“Did killing the whole gang, and the man who was trying to rape me make you feel better?” She poses.

He sits there in silence, his eyes turning back down to the flames. He remembers his nightmare and feels the pain weighing heavy on his heart. His silence answers her question.

“Thank you for saving me. It was a good thing that you did, but once you kill those men, you might not be as good anymore; it might not even make you feel better.” She says softly.

“We’ll see...” Kyle murmurs.

Chapter 5: Drag Me Down

As the morning sun rises, the pair leave the barn, walking toward the road where Cassandra was attacked. They find the bodies, all looted and left naked in the street. Cassandra sees a Voeldahn man with feline features and brown and tan fur in a tuxedo pattern. His eyes are milky white as he quickly decays. She kneels over the body and begins to cry as Kyle stands behind her. Kneeling down, he gently rests a hand on her back. She turns to him and sniffles, trying to control her emotions.

“What do you do with your dead?” He asks.

“We burn them.” She softly replies.

“I’ll help you.” He offers.

“No... There isn’t time, and this is too important. We should just go.” She says as she stands.

“Are you sure?”

“Come on...” She says as she brushes by him.

He looks down at the body for a moment. Cassandra stops and turns back, realizing that Kyle isn’t following her. She watches as he places the corpse’s hands gently over

their chest, and closes their eyelids with his fingers. The respect he shows to the body of a man he doesn't even know touches her, especially considering who he was to her. She looks at Vernon's corpse, tears welling in her eyes as she turns away. She can't bear to look at her boyfriend's body any longer. She keeps walking.

"I'm sorry." Kyle says to the corpse, before quickly catching up to Cassandra.

They walk in silence for hours, taking short breaks every now and then. Kyle is quick to share both his food and water with the girl, who has only the package wrapped in a red cloth, the pistol that he gave her and the clothes on her back. They walk until twilight, and Kyle's muscles scream in pain. They set up a campsite for the night, away from the road. They sit beside a small campfire, keeping rocks piled high around it so as to better hide it from anyone who may come wandering by. Kyle looks through his pack, checking their supplies.

"How far away is your village?" He asks her.

"Barely three days walk. We're already almost half-way there." She replies.

"Good. We probably have exactly three days of food between the two of us. I just hope we can find water along the way." He thinks aloud.

“My village has a well... That’s what’s so important.” She begins.

“What is?”

“The thing I’m carrying in the red cloth. It’s a part for the water pump. Without it, the reserve water tank will run dry and my village won’t have water. It holds about a week’s supply. If we don’t find water, I’m sure they’ll happily give you some, after all you’ve done for me.” She continues.

“Okay. Still, the last thing you want on a long hike is a dehydration headache. Trust me on that one.” He warns her.

Kyle takes the first shift, already unable to sleep. He keeps his rifle close as he watches the horizon, his back to the fire. An hour passes and he can hear Cassandra mumbling something in her sleep. He turns back to watch her, keeping his eyes from looking into the small flame beside her body. She speaks incoherently as she sleeps; she doesn’t look very peaceful. He turns back to the horizon, but feels badly for her as she mumbles a name more than once. He quietly moves over to her, sitting above her head. He reaches out and rests a hand gently on her arm, stroking her fur with his thumb. She doesn’t wake up, and seems to relax.

“Miss you, Vern...” She mumbles.

“I miss you too, Lara.” He whispers to himself.

He leaves his hand in place, gently stroking her arm until she is no longer talking in her sleep. He sits there quietly, reflecting on all that has happened to him in the last few days. He can't help but wonder if this is what Cassandra feels when she reflects on her own loss. He looks at the moon in the sky, using the width of his hand to count time, moving it from the base of the moon and toward the horizon. It's Cassandra's shift. He looks back to her; seeing how peacefully she sleeps, he doesn't want to disturb her. He doesn't feel tired anyway, so he lets her rest, staying up all night instead.

The following morning, Cassandra awakes to Kyle cooking breakfast. She bolts upright. Did he wake her up, and she fell back asleep? Did he even wake her up at all? She can't be sure. Before her he lays out a cloth with jerky, dry cheese, some bread, and heated beans placed carefully atop it.

"I'm so sorry! Did I fall asleep on my shift?!" She apologizes.

"No. I let you sleep." He replies, checking his rifle.

"Oh... Why didn't you wake me?"

"You sounded like you were having a good dream." He says, now checking his pistols.

“Not at first, but then it got better... It was nice after that.” She admits.

“Good.” He racks the slide of his Smith and Wesson.

“Don’t you need sleep?” She asks, concerned.

“Don’t worry about it, Cass.” He murmurs.

She watches him for a moment; he seems driven. After eating their breakfast, they clean the campsite and collect their gear before returning to the road. Cassandra leads them as they walk down the street. They maintain idle banter about the weather, favorite foods, and what little they remember of life before The Ending; it keeps their minds occupied as they march down the long and lonesome road. After taking a short lunch break sometime during mid-day, they keep walking, only to see a plume of smoke rising in the distance.

“Is that your village?” Kyle asks.

“No. We aren’t close enough yet.” Cassandra replies.

They pick up their pace, jogging as they move towards the smoke. It takes them off the street and towards a patch of woods, which they quickly enter. Kyle struggles to keep close to Cassandra, who moves through the forest far more swiftly than he can; she is quite agile. She stops as she reaches the edge of the forest, which opens up to a clearing just beyond the trees. Kyle stands beside her, looking

through the brush. In the distance is a campsite, seated at the bottom of a small dip in the land. Kyle takes his small binoculars from his belt pouch, looking through the lenses. Cassandra notes his horrified expression.

She hesitates at first, but her curiosity gets the better of her. She reaches out, placing her hand gently over his, gaining his attention. He moves away from the binoculars, turning his head toward her. She slowly takes them from his hands. He doesn't stop her.

"You don't want to look, Cass. Trust me." He warns her.

She takes a moment to think it over, before quickly bringing the binoculars to her eyes. She is horrified by what she sees. Five men hang out at the campsite. Bodies lie at their feet, of two men and an older woman. They are all human with brown skin and black hair, and look as though they may be related. The five raiders are a mixture of Voeldahn and human. She sees a tail swishing and focuses on the Voeldahn man. Kyle sees her turning to the man.

"Please don't look!" He exclaims, reaching for the binoculars.

She pulls away from him and focuses on the man. The man stands near some sort of pole or large stake, planted

firmly into the ground. His hands grip something in front of him, holding at hip height as he moves his pelvis back and forth. His tail sways rather happily as she sees human feet, somewhat small and dainty as they bounce up and down just behind the Voeldahn's buttocks. Looking closer, she see's brown skinned hands ties up to the pole; to her horror and disgust, the man is raping an innocent girl. She drops the binoculars to the ground and grits her teeth in anger.

Kyle sees the look on her face as sorrowful tears well in her eyes. Something about her visible agony makes him burn with anger. He picks up the binoculars, returning them to his belt pouch. He takes his rifle and holds it tightly in his hands as he exits the woods. Cassandra is shocked that he would do such a thing, especially so outnumbered. She keeps close to her companion, following his lead as he gets down to the ground and crawls several hundred meters to the small camp, remaining undetected by the scoundrels. As they close in, around one hundred meters away, Kyle brings up his rifle, adjusting the rear sight for the elevation as he takes aim. He rests his finger on the trigger.

Cassandra covers her feline ears as he fires, striking the Voeldahn in the shoulder, still in the middle of his hideous act. He pulls away from the girl, dropping her against the pole as he spins around. Kyle fires again, striking him in the chest. The raiders look around, trying to find where the shots are coming from. Kyle crawls closer as they shoot wildly in several directions, using only handguns. He takes aim and kills a second raider with a shot to the

head, now barely fifty meters away. As the raiders reload their pistols, he emerges from his position, taking aim at the men.

“Stop! Drop the weapons, or I’ll blow your God damn brains out!” He demands.

Cassandra stands beside him, holding her pistol in her hands, well out of practical range. The duo rush in as the raiders comply, dropping their pistols as they concede to the rifleman. They close in on the trio; Cassandra approaches the young woman while Kyle kicks their weapons aside. The girl is completely nude and tied at the wrists to the wooden stake. She has been horribly beaten, covered in bruises and symmetrical cuts. She dangles motionless from her wrists. Semen is visible on her brown skin in several places. Cassandra is very uncomfortable at the sight, but feels her pulse.

“S-she’s dead.” Cassandra chokes out.

“Alright, you sick fucks, back the fuck up!” Kyle demands. He aims at a raider on his right. “You! Tie up the other two with those ropes over here.”

The raiders look between each other for a moment as the human begins to comply. With Kyle’s eyes focused on the man to his right, the Voeldahn to his far-left rushes him,

grabbing for his SKS. Kyle swings the rifle, slamming the butt into the Voeldahn's face and dropping him to the ground as the human in the middle grabs Kyle from behind. As they struggle for his rifle, and the Voeldahn climbs up from the ground, four shots ring out. Kyle pushes the raider off him as they immediately stop fighting.

They all turn to Cassandra, who holds her little pistol in her hands, smoke rising from the barrel. The human to Kyle's right lies dead, four rounds in his back. She points at the others, who hold up their hands. Kyle cracks the Voeldahn behind the knees with the stock of his rifle, before aiming it at the side of the remaining human's head.

Kyle demands one raider tie up the other. With a firearm pointed at them on either side, and the odds now even, they quickly comply. While Cassandra holds the last free raider at gunpoint, Kyle ties him up himself. They sit the raiders down on the ground near the firepit while Cassandra looks over the scene.

"What are we doing this for?" The Voeldahn raider asks.

"Shut the fuck up!" Kyle smacks the back of his head.

"Seriously, it's not like you can send us to jail." The human raider chuckles.

“No one cares about that used up bitch anyway.” The Voeldahn smirks.

Kyle pistol whips the Voeldahn in the face with the butt of his Smith and Wesson sidearm, knocking out a tooth.

“She must have just died.” Cassandra comments.

“Nah. She was gone before the last guy got started.” The human cackles.

Cassandra is visibly horrified, and Kyle becomes enraged. He can't believe the nerve of these sociopaths, and neither can he stand to see Cassandra's pain; his empathy forces him to feel an amalgam of their individual agony. He takes out a small carving knife from a pot on the far side of the firepit, quickly jamming it into the stomach of the human raider. He groans in pain as Kyle pulls hard to one side, pushing him back on the ground. He reveals his intestines as Cassandra gasps, turning away.

“Holy shit!” The Voeldahn cries out.

“Scream for me, bitch!” Kyle growls.

He suddenly drags the human away, dropping the knife on the ground as he pushes his head into the fire; he screams like a banshee. The Voeldahn falls over as he tries

to wriggle away, but Kyle aims his Smith and Wesson, firing a single nine-millimeter slug into his lower leg.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” He roars with a sinister grin.

The human tries to sit up, but Kyle places a foot on his chest, holding his head in the fire as his flesh blisters and turns colors. He sees a bottle of homemade alcohol and leans over, grabbing the brew. He pulls the cap off and tosses it aside, before stepping back and pouring it all over the man’s head, neck and chest. Fire engulfs him as he rolls around, trying to put out the flames as he presses on his own exposed intestines. Cassandra opens her eyes, looking in horror as Kyle simply watches the man suffer, his heart as icy as his piercing blue eyes.

“Please, stop this!” She cries out.

He looks up to her, then down at the man. For some reason, the look in her eyes compels him to obey. He aims his pistol, firing two rounds into his chest. He fails to die right away, so he fires a third round into his head from nearly point-blank range, instantly ending his suffering.

“What a waste of good ammunition.” He mutters.

“Oh God. Please, God no!” The Voeldahn cries out, still wriggling away.

“Please who?” Kyle growls.

He steps on the raider’s leg, causing him to groan in pain. He aims his pistol at the man’s head as he curls up a ball.

“God isn’t listening to the likes of you, and neither am I!” Kyle angrily barks.

He takes the knife that he used on his human comrade, picking it up from the ground where he had dropped it. He kicks the Voeldahn onto his back and straddles his chest. Gripping his bottom jaw, he holds his snout closed with one hand. He takes the knife and swiftly gouges out his left eye. He shifts, screaming his muffled screams as Kyle bashes him in the head with the butt of the knife. He slices off his right ear, cutting down to the very base. Cassandra turns away as he mutilates the man. She covers her ears to block out the muffled screams as he works. Several minutes pass and Kyle still hasn’t stopped. She’s had enough.

“Kyle! Stop it, right now! Please!” She screams.

The man whimpers as she turns back to see what Kyle had done to him. She brings a hand to her mouth as she sees Kyle, still sitting atop the man's chest. He holds the bloody knife, looking at her as though confused by her pleading. The man is missing both ears, both eyes, and his nose is split at the right nostril. The top half of his tail has been severed, as well as both of his thumbs, and a large 'L' has been carved into his chest. His fur is matted with his own blood.

"He's suffered enough..." Cassandra begins.

"No! He had this coming!" Kyle growls.

"Kyle, please... Let's just go..." She begs.

As she speaks, he sees the sheer horror upon her face. He finally realizes that it's because of him, as much as it is from the remnants of the camp. He suddenly awakens from his daze. He looks down at the man who is quite likely bleeding to death, blinded in both eyes, without the ability to grasp objects, and who may very well be nearly deaf. He tosses the crimson knife aside and stands up from the man, his pants soaked in his blood. Kyle can't help but taunt him one final time.

"Don't worry. Some good Samaritan might come by, free you, and patch you up... Or maybe they'll just rape you to death..." He grumbles.

Cassandra is terribly shaken, and genuinely frightened of Kyle. She grips her pistol tightly, as they turn from the camp and head back for the road, leaving everything as they had found it. Reaching the road that they had left, they walk along it in silence. He looks down at his bloody hands, feeling the rifle slung on his shoulder and his sidearm holstered at his hip; they suddenly feel very heavy. He reflects on what he had done to those two raiders, and realizes that he can't make himself feel badly for it; it terrifies him. As twilight approaches, they silently build a small camp, building a little fire, guarded by a high pile of rocks, and laying out their sleeping bags. Cassandra never lets go of her pistol.

As Kyle sits on his sleeping bag, he stares into the small fire and is left wondering if Cass was right. His mind races as his hands tremor. His eyes well with tears and he lowers his head; he feels terribly ashamed. Cassandra has been watching him apprehensively ever since the camp, and notices the shift in his demeanor. Perhaps now is the time to leave him behind and continue on to her village alone? She is certainly close enough to make it before dawn, and he may be too far gone to be saved.

"Cassandra..." He suddenly speaks with a shaking voice.

"Yeah?" She sits up, the pistol held tightly in her hand and tucked just inside of her sleeping bag.

“Vengeance isn’t going to make me better, only worse. I never relished in the violence the way I did earlier today; it was completely out of character for me. It’s something I couldn’t have envisioned myself doing in my worst nightmares. I don’t know what happened to me. They were so callous, the way they disregarded that woman’s life... I just couldn’t control myself. Part of me wanted to make them feel her pain, and the other part of me liked doing it... It scares me.” He shamefully admits. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Cassandra...”

She listens to him, and as he speaks, she realizes that he isn’t a monster; he’s passionate and sensitive, but lacks direction. He hangs his head and weeps. She feels her heart breaking at the mere sight of his misery, his blood caked hands pressed tightly against his face. She remembers what he did for her, and his compassion for Vernon’s remains; she will stay by his side and trust him not to turn on her. She gets up from her sleeping bag, leaving her pistol behind. She sits down beside Kyle and gently slides an arm around his back, holding him comfortingly as he cries on her shoulder like a child.

“What have I done?” He chokes out.

“Shh... Everything is going to be okay.” She whispers softly.

He wraps his arms around her body, holding her close as he cries for a moment. She rests a hand on his head and strokes his hair, comforting him until he calms down. Soon, his tears subside and he sits up, moving away from her. He wipes them away with the sleeve of his blood-stained shirt, sniffing as he looks back at her.

“I’m sorry I scared you. I never meant too.” He apologizes meekly.

“It’s alright. It’ll be okay now... I’ll take the first watch.” She says with a warm smile.

“Okay... Take my rifle. It’s ready to go.” He says with a sniffle.

He lies down in the sleeping bag and zips himself in as she takes up his rifle, holding it in her hands. For a split second, she considers her options, but his tears were sincere and she has already made up her mind; he is worth saving. She sits by the fire, her tail swaying as she looks to the horizon, keeping her eyes focused away from the light. She keeps the rifle resting across her lap as she sits, ever vigilant. Suddenly, she can hear Kyle mumbling. She turns and glances over her shoulder, hearing him groaning and muttering incoherently. He is clearly having a nightmare.

She moves over to him and softly rests a hand on his shoulder, trying not to wake him. She watches him, gently stroking his arm with her fingers, as he begins to calm down.

She sits beside him for the rest of the night, deciding not to wake him up for his shift. He sleeps peacefully, awakening the very next morning. He opens his eyes, seeing a tail resting before his face. He looks down to see Cassandra sitting in front of him, still watching the horizon.

“Hey...” He groans as he sits up.

“Good morning.” She smiles.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I thought you could use the rest. Have any dreams?” She asks him.

“I was having a nightmare, but then it got better.” He mutters.

They eat the remaining rations in his pack, and drink the last of the water, before cleaning the campsite and heading back for the road. By mid-day, they can see a water tower peaking over the horizon. Cassandra’s eyes light up as it comes into view.

“This is it! This is my village!” She happily exclaims.

They move quickly to her nearby village. Kyle feels glad to see Cassandra so happy; he feels like it is one of the only good things he has done since he left. As they approach her village, Cassandra decides to never speak of

what he had done to anyone within, knowing that they would never trust him if they knew.

“Hey Kyle...” She begins.

“Yeah?”

“When we get there, just follow my lead, and let me do all of the talking, alright?” She says with a grin.

“Yeah, okay Cass.” He nods and smiles back.

Chapter 6: Settling

As soon as they approach the gate, armed guards demand his weapons. Trusting Cassandra, Kyle relinquishes everything he has to the Voeldahn guards, who look at him with considerable suspicion. Noting his bloody and ragged appearance, he is quickly whisked away. He is locked in a small cell built into one of the few brick buildings left standing in the small town, now the home of Cassandra’s people. He is left alone in the building, staring at the steel bars of his prison. He waits for hours on end, until evening approaches. No one comes to check on him, or even bring him water.

He looks at a nearby window, beginning to worry as the sky turns a faded pink. Looking outside through the same nearby window, he watches the villagers struggling to install the component that Cassandra was carrying. Suddenly, an older Voeldahn man enters the building and approaches his cell, quietly standing before him for a moment. The silence is almost deafening.

“Hello!” Kyle suddenly chirps, smiling as he waves politely at the man.

“Hello to you too...” The Voeldahn narrows his green eyes.

He stands before the cage, covered in thick grey and white fur, with a feline appearance not dissimilar to Cassandra’s. His short red hair is brushed back.

“How did you get that blood all over you?” He asks Kyle.

“Oh... I uh... I had to kill a raider... I used a knife.” Kyle drops his head.

“I see... I’m Drake... Drake McKraken.” He remarks.

“Oh! Are you related to Cassandra?”

“You know her last name?!” Drake exclaims in shock.

“Well yeah... She told me.” Kyle raises an eyebrow.

“That girl...” Drake shakes his head in frustration.

“Well, you did too.” Kyle points out.

“Yes, but you’re locked in a cell.” Drake grins.

“Good point. So, what now?”

“I suppose now I let you out. You saved my only sibling, and for that I’m grateful.” Drake says as he unlocks the cell.

“So, is this the part where you tell me to get out of town?” Kyle facetiously asks.

“Something like that...”

Free from the small cell, Kyle stretches out his arms and looks to Drake, promptly asking him if they need help with their water pump. Though not nearly the engineer or mechanic his father was, Kyle is quick to lend a hand to his hosts. Accepting the help, Drake leads him outside and towards the pump. Voeldahn stare at him as though they had never seen a human before. Perhaps it’s the dried blood? Kyle moves through the crowd and stands beneath the water tower, examining the pump.

Taking tools from an open chest, and the component from the hands of a Voeldahn villager, he quickly installs it. With the water pump repaired, he turns it back on. The crowd is elated. It is obvious that they lack anyone with mechanical expertise. For a moment, he wonders how they

even knew what part was broken to begin with, or where to find a replacement.

“So, will you be needing supplies for your journey? I was told that was the bargain you made with my sister.” Drake begins.

It is clear to Kyle that Drake has considerable authority in the town. He looks at the crowd of villagers and spots Cassandra in the background. She stares at him. He looks at her for a moment and sighs; he suddenly feels guilty accepting any tangible rewards.

“Don’t worry about it.” Kyle replies.

“Excuse me?” Drake raises his brow.

“I said I don’t need anything.” Kyle reiterates.

“What about this quest of yours?” Drake presses.

“I don’t think I should bother with that anymore.”

“Why not?” Drake asks.

“It’s hard to explain. Are you eager to get rid of me?” Kyle smirks.

Drake shrugs his shoulders.

“Just give me back my weapons and gear, and I’ll get out of your hair. I mean! ... You know...” Kyle embarrasses himself.

“It’s alright.” Drake chuckles. “I’ll have them brought out to you.”

Kyle walks through the crowd, who move away from him as if they are afraid to touch him. He approaches Cassandra, standing before her.

“Thanks for what you did for me... And for getting me out of that cell. I know you must have had something to do with that.” He smiles warmly.

“It’s alright. You did just as much for me... So, where will you go? Back home?” She asks.

“I don’t know...” Kyle rests a hand on his head, running his fingers through his hair. “Probably not.” He sighs. “Maybe I’ll just find a new one.”

“Oh...” She murmurs.

She steps aside as he starts to walk away. She watches him leave for a moment, before quickly rushing up to him.

“Wait!” She yells.

He stops and turns back to her. They stand a distance away from the crowd, who watch curiously.

“Maybe you don’t have to go?” She poses.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’d fit in very well.” He replies.

“You can, if you try. You don’t have to be out there, alone.” She continues.

“Let’s just suppose that I don’t want to be out there; I don’t think it matters, because I get the feeling that Drake doesn’t want me here. It’s probably better if I just go.” He explains.

He sees Drake approaching from the crowd. He turns away and takes a step, but Cassandra reaches out and grabs his hand.

“Wait.” She pleads.

“Cass...” He shakes his head.

“What if he wants to stay?” She turns to her brother.

Drake glances down at her hand holding his, then back to her, before turning his eyes to Kyle.

“Well... You’ve got a way with the machines... And you *did* save my sister, as annoying as she can be... I suppose we owe you more than a cheap ‘thank you, now get out’.”
Drake remarks.

He looks to his sister, who nods her head.

“We can set you up somewhere, if you don’t want to leave.” He continues.

“Alright. That’d be nice. My old place is being renovated anyway.” Kyle jokes.

Cassandra grins, pulling Kyle by the hand, leading him away from Drake and passed the crowd. She takes him to a small wooden house, situated on a cul-de-sac. The road has tall weeds growing through the cracks, and the lawns are overgrown, giving a very rural feel to the once suburban neighborhood. She takes him into the small house at the very edge of the cul-de-sac. Though the outside of the house appears somewhat rundown, the interior is actually rather nice, and even looks recently cleaned. Glancing around the living room, he sees his SKS rifle, musette bag, holstered sidearm, and military web belt, sitting in a little pile on a loveseat against the far wall.

“You can stay here!” Cassandra giddily exclaims.

"I see I'm already unpacked." He points to his belongings.

"Oh... Well..." She hesitates.

"Who else lives on this street?" He asks.

"Just some villagers, and Drake."

"Drake? Where?" Kyle narrows his eyes.

"Right next door." She points at a wall.

"Keeping me close, I guess. I knew he didn't trust me." He mutters. "So where do you live?"

"Um... With Drake." She sheepishly admits.

"Well, pleased to meet you, neighbor!" He chuckles.

He walks around the room for a moment, before sitting down on the loveseat. It is actually quite comfortable, for being so old. He looks to Cass, who smiles pleasantly at him. He takes his rifle, pack, and assorted gear, setting them on the floor and clearing the second cushion for her. He motions for her to come over. Her tail sways as she bites her bottom lip for a moment. She walks over and sits beside him on the couch.

"This is a nice little house. Thank you." He says sincerely.

"Your welcome. I'm glad you like it. I was hoping you would." She replies.

“So, you picked it?” He asks.

“Well yeah... No one was using it.” She shrugs.

“Was it also your idea to have me stay? Be honest.”

Cassandra looks to him with a solemn expression. Turning her eyes down to the floor, she slowly nods.

“Why?” He can’t help but wonder.

“Because you’re a good person, and good people shouldn’t be out there.” She answers.

Kyle is touched. He doesn’t know what to say. They sit in silence for a moment before Cassandra suddenly rises from her seat.

“Well, I better get going.” She says.

“Hey, Cass!”

“Yeah?” She turns to him,

“Will I see you around?”

“Did you want to?” She poses.

“Yeah. You’re the only friend I’ve got.” He remarks.

She smiles, then walks out of the house without saying a word.

“I wonder if that was a ‘yes’?” He thinks aloud as he sits alone in his new home.

Stretching out on the loveseat, he hangs his feet over an armrest, making himself comfortable. He takes his Smith and Wesson pistol, resting it over his chest as he becomes drowsy, soon falling asleep with the gun in his hand. The following morning, Cassandra does her best to make Kyle feel welcome, showing him the town and explaining the rules and inner workings. Her brother, Drake, is the chief of security; though not actually in charge of the town, he may as well be. Her people operate in a way not dissimilar to his previous home, which makes adjusting relatively easy, considering he is the only resident human.

They spend all day together, walking and talking. At first, they merely talk about the village. Kyle shares his talents and hobbies, so that they can find him productive work. As the day wears on, Cassandra and Kyle open up to each other, if ever so slightly. They share amusing stories about their pasts, things that they enjoy doing in their spare time, and other priceless nothings. He is grateful for her company; she is equally fulfilled by helping him adjust, it takes her mind off of her sorrows.

The community is tribal, with shared food and water, though there is personal ownership and a barter system. Everyone is expected to contribute in some way, unless otherwise unable. He puts his various skills to use, fixing their machinery, going on hunts with his rifle, occasionally standing guard at the gate, and tilling or harvesting the fields with the farmers on exceptionally boring days. It's not all that different from the life he had lived back at the compound. After the first few days, he gets used to the stares. After about a week, the stares cease altogether; Kyle has become just another face among the Voeldahn villagers.

The weeks pass by, and soon he has lived there for nearly two months. His friendship with Cassandra has endured, even blossomed; they speak every day, often for hours. She grows close to Kyle, and always seems to be nearby. Kyle reciprocates, often visiting Cassandra when he isn't busy, if even just to say hello. Her presence has made it worth the effort to fit in with her people. The two are seen together often enough that it no longer draws attention.

"Hey, Ky!" Cassandra calls out.

Kyle is leaning over the dismantled body of a small windmill generator, used to power security lights that run along the outer wall of the village. He had been greasing the bearings as part of its regular maintenance. He

straightens his back as he turns to face her. She holds a small satchel in her hands.

"Hey Cassie!" He says with a wide grin.

"I brought you some lunch." She smiles.

"How sweet of you. Now I have two!" He chuckles.

A Voeldahn man working on another windmill in the background stops to watch them.

"We could always share them." She suggests.

"Sure!" He reaches out for the satchel.

She looks down at his grease covered hands, taking a step back.

"You better wipe those first." She remarks.

"Or else what?" He teases.

"I'm serious..." She warns.

He looks down at his hands and smirks. He reaches out for her as she sets down the satchel and backs away. For a moment he chases her around the windmill. The man in the

background enjoys the show. Kyle steps closer, nearly able to grab her. Cassandra moves to the side, jumps atop the workbench near the dismantled windmill, then leaps onto Kyle's back in a matter of seconds. She wraps her arms tightly around his neck, her feet resting at his thighs as he nearly loses his balance. He steadies himself, standing there for a moment. Cassandra remains fused to his back, her chin resting on his shoulder while her tail sways. He hears her breathing in his ear, feeling the warm air on his cheek.

"Comfortable?" He asks.

"... Yes." She replies softly.

He steps over to the workbench, turning around so that she can climb down. She sits atop the bench, letting go of him. He grabs a rag and wipes his hands clean of the grease, before using a trough of water and a bar of soap to finish the job. He turns back to look at her. She sways her feet as she watches him for a moment, grinning happily.

"Ready?" He asks.

"Uh-huh!" She nods, sliding off the workbench.

"Taking your pet human for a walk?" The man jests.

Cassandra glares at the man, tossing a dirty rag in his direction. Taking the satchel and his already packed lunch, Kyle and Cassandra walk away, heading toward an old park at the far end of the village; it's their favorite spot to sit together. They sit beside a large oak tree and eat, occasionally gazing in each other's direction.

"You know, you never talk about Lara." Cassandra suddenly begins.

"There's not really a reason too." Kyle replies.

"Well, why not?" She pries.

"Well, why don't you ever talk about Vernon?" He retorts.

She shrugs her shoulders.

"There isn't much to talk about. We were together for a few months, and then he died." She comments.

"Do you ever miss him?" He looks to her.

"Sometimes, I guess..."

She looks over and sees his gaze. She suddenly seems embarrassed, as though she had inadvertently said something offensive.

“I mean, we were together almost as long as he’s been gone, so it’s not like I think about him a lot or anything.” She adds.

“It’s alright.” He remarks, taking a bite out of his cheese and venison sandwich.

“What about you? Do you miss Lara?”

“Honestly... Not really.” He begins.

Cassandra seems surprised.

“You were with her for a while though.” She remarks.

“Yeah, but I had my dog a few years longer than I even knew her, and I lost both my parents on the same day. I miss my mom and dad more. I mean, I sometimes think about her, but I think it’s because I miss someone being there all of the time.” He explains.

“I’m here!” She exclaims.

“I meant at nighttime too.” He chuckles.

“Oh... I miss that too.” She murmurs.

“I do appreciate you though...” He scoots a little closer. “You know, Cassie... I...”

She looks at him as he seems to struggle with his words.

"I want you to know something... See... Well... When you're around I-"

"I thought I'd find you both!" Drake interrupts.

"You know we hang out here?" Kyle asks in surprise.

"No, I mean when I found one of you, the other was guaranteed to be a few feet away." Drake laughs.

"Oh." Kyle grins.

"I just wanted to let you both know that we are having a little party for Samantha and Nicholas tomorrow. He just asked for her hand." Drake continues.

"Well good for him." Kyle nods sincerely.

"They're cute together." Cassandra remarks.

"Yeah, well they wanted you to come, and to bring your pet." Drake teases.

Cassandra becomes flustered, tossing a nearby stick at him. Drake raises his hands, shielding his face.

"Easy!" He exclaims.

"So, which one is the pet?" Kyle asks curiously.

Drake looks at Kyle for a moment, then turns and walks away.

“Damn. It always has to be me.” He mutters.

“Maybe I should get you a collar and leash?” She teases.

“Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Kyle winks.

“What? Um... I uh...” She stammers. “I think you’ve been working too hard. The grease and paint fumes must be getting to your head.” She quickly collects herself. “I better go.”

As she stands, Kyle reaches out for her, taking her hand.

“Can I come see you later, Cassie? I wasn’t finished with what I had to say.” He pleads.

She sees the expression on his face. Whatever he wants to tell her must be important to him.

“Okay. I’ll stop by your house after dinner. I promise.” She smiles.

As she leaves, Kyle breathes a sigh of relief. He is somewhat glad that Drake interrupted. He quickly finishes

his sandwich and returns to the workshop. His associate is still there, working on the windmills.

“Have fun?” The man asks, wiping grease from his hands.

“Eh.” Kyle shrugs.

“Yeah, bullshit.” The man grins.

Kyle quickly assembles the windmills. His associate had finished greasing all of the bearings in his absence. They spend the next few hours using a pulley system to lift them up to the top of the stalks. Using a tall ladder, Kyle carefully bolts the windmill generators to the stalks, before they raise the blades. Evening creeps in as he tightens the bolts on the last windmill blade. He climbs down, dries the sweat from his head with a clean rag, then washes his hands and face with soap and water from the trough. He quickly returns home. As he approaches his house, he sees Cassandra waiting for him patiently on his steps, her tail swaying.

“Hi!” She rushes up happily to greet him.

“It’s good to see you too.” He grins.

He leads her into his home where he sits on the loveseat. She quickly sits next to him, turning her body to

face him as a leg lies across the cushion, her foot hanging over the edge. They sit through a moment of silence as Kyle seems nervous. He isn't sure he knows what to say anymore, even though he had spent the entire day practicing in his head.

"So... What did you want to talk to me about?" Cassandra finally asks, cutting through the uncomfortable silence.

"Well, it's hard to talk about, for me at least." He begins.

"Oh..." She suddenly seems worried.

Kyle isn't sure if she anticipates what he is going to say, and is nervous about how he might react to her response, or if she genuinely doesn't know, and is scared to hear what it might be. Either way, he doesn't like her expression; it unsettles him considerably. He lowers his head, unable to recall his eloquent little speech that he had imagined earlier today.

"You are the only reason I stayed here, Cassie. You make it worth the effort." He blurts out.

"Oh!" She seems less nervous, wearing a faint smile.

"I don't talk about Lara because it's in the past. When you are near me, I forget all about it. Even when I'm alone and I think about it, it doesn't hurt anymore, because I know

that you are here. Having you in my life more than makes up for all of my past suffering.”

“Kyle...” She coos.

“Cassie... You make everything okay. I *really* like you, and I care about you a lot.” He sighs.

He looks down and away from her, too afraid to look up and see an upset or angry expression. She scoots closer to him on the loveseat, her knee pressed against his as they face each other. She reaches out, placing a hand on his cheek, stroking his face softly. She slowly pulls at his chin, turning his head up to look at her. He turns his eyes to her. They look at him with considerable compassion, if not something greater.

“You make all of my pain go away too...” She softly speaks. “I really, *really* like you. I’ll always be around for you.”

“And I’ll always be around for you too.” He smiles.

“How long have you felt this way?” She asks.

“A while. Probably almost a month.” He recalls.

“What took you so long to tell me?!” She sweetly demands.

“I was scared of what you might say, or *not* say.”

“I understand. I’ve felt this way for a long time too. I never knew if I could ever tell you myself.” She remarks.

She rests a hand over his. He turns his hand over and holds hers, gently stroking the back of her fingers with his thumb. He takes his other hand and gently strokes her cheek. She grabs onto his hand, holding it against her face as she closes her eyes and seems to purr. Her tails swings quickly from side to side with each stroke of his thumb on her cheek.

“I was worried you were going to tell me something else.” She quietly admits.

“Like what?”

“Like that you were leaving... Or that you liked someone, other than me.” She sheepishly answers.

“Cassie...”

They lean closer until their noses touch. Their eyes narrow as they gaze at one another. Their lips gently caress each other, before pressing together in a soft but loving kiss. She bites her bottom lip, grinning wide as they slowly lean back.

“I’m sorry it took me so long.” He whispers.

“It’s okay. You’ve said it now, and there’s no going back.” She whispers back, placing a hand on the back of his neck.

“I don’t want go back, anyway.” He grins, leaning in for another kiss.

Chapter 7: Options

Drake awakens the next morning and climbs out of bed. He stands at the window and opens it, listening to the birds chirping and feeling the warm air blowing gently through his fur. He gets dressed and exits his room. He knocks on Cassandra’s bedroom door, noticing that it is cracked open. She always leaves her door shut when she is actually at home. Pushing the door open, her bed is empty, with a neatly folded blanket atop it; she either left very early, or never came home last night. Looking closer, he sees that there is no indentation in her down pillow.

He wonders where she could have gone, but as he enters the living room, he can see her leaving Kyle’s house from a nearby window. Even from this distance, she looks quite happy and well rested. She enters the home as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

“Hi, Drake.” She greets him with a wave.

She walks into the kitchen and stops, turning back to her brother.

“No breakfast?” She asks.

He stands in the doorway, his arms crossed as he stares at her.

“What?”

“So... I guess he isn’t just a pet anymore.” Drake begins.

“That’s not a nice thing to say about my best friend.” She remarks defensively.

“Is that *all* he is?” Drake demands.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I was awake when you came in; I was standing right here! I saw you leave his house just a minute ago. I bet if I were still asleep, you would have climbed into bed and pretended to get up, wouldn’t you?” He barks.

“It would have made everything a lot easier.” She admits.

“Seriously?! ... Kyle... You and Kyle... A human! I mean, I knew you two were close, but that’s a step too far.” He exclaims.

“I care about him, and he cares about me. What’s it to you? You’re not Dad, or my boyfriend. It’s my life, and he makes me happy.” She retorts.

She quickly pushes passed him.

“Where are you going?” He demands.

“Home, where I’m wanted.” She growls.

She storms out of the house, immediately returning to Kyle’s home next door.

“I never should have let her talk me into keeping him here...” Drake grumbles as the front door slams.

Cassandra barges into Kyle’s home, startling him as he cooks breakfast in the kitchen. Atop the dead stove is a small wood fire burning within a large metal pot, and a metal grill sitting atop the pot. A skillet containing two eggs and several strips of bacon sits atop the grill.

“Cassie! So, you *do* want to stay for breakfast.” Kyle smiles.

She quickly approaches him, wrapping her arms around his torso as she buries her snout in his chest. He slips his arms around her, gently stroking her back as she nuzzles his neck.

“Are you alright?” He asks with concern.

“Drake knows, and I don’t care. I don’t care if the whole village knows.” She replies.

“Oh, okay. They’ll all know soon enough anyway.” He kisses her cheek.

“I’m not going to hide my feelings for you, Ky.” She continues.

“Good. I won’t either. So, did you want some bacon and eggs?”

She giggles, briefly rubbing her snout against his cheek.

“Please.” She coos.

She spends the entire morning with Kyle, along with the previous night. He cooks a large breakfast, serving her first. As they sit together at the small dinner table, they eat and talk about their budding relationship; Kyle immediately offers her a place in his home, if she wants it.

“So soon?” She asks in surprise.

“Well, tomorrow isn’t a guarantee, and I know how I feel about you. I certainly wouldn’t mind you being here all day *and* all night.” He says with a sincere smile.

“I’d like that, and it’s probably for the best anyway.” She replies.

“So, want me to go and get your stuff for you?” He asks, shifting in his seat as though to stand.

“Not right now. Give Drake some space. We can go there together and get my things later tonight.” She says as she rests a hand on his arm.

“Okay. Whatever you want.” He leans in, kissing her tenderly on her lips.

“Keep that up and we’re going to get along very well.” She teasingly winks.

They finish their breakfast and continue their daily routine as if nothing were out of the ordinary, with the exception of publicly displaying affection for each other. Though their hugs and kisses get a few surprised looks, no one in the village can honestly say that they never saw this coming from a mile away. Kyle works on an old tractor, hoping to get it running long before the next harvest. Cassandra often works the fields, tilling and gardening. When there is no gardening to be done, she works alongside the other women of the village, weaving, sewing, cooking

and brewing. All anyone wants to talk to her about is her new human boyfriend.

As the day wears on, the couple shares lunch together. Kyle surprises Cassandra while she is sewing clothes with some of the other women, quickly whisking her away for a moment alone. As the afternoon races by them, it is soon time for the village to gather for the union between Samantha and Nicholas. In her village, it is customary to declare permanent unions before the entire tribe, before celebrating the pairing with a night of excess eating and drinking. Though neither of them voices it, they are both mildly concerned about seeing Drake at the gathering, as he never did seem to like Kyle to begin with; in the time that Kyle has lived there, they've never been anything more than forcibly cordial with each other.

The couple walks hand-in-hand to the gathering, drawing considerable attention from everyone, including the lovers whom the gathering is actually for. Nicholas and Samantha pledge their union to each other, sparking the celebration. Kyle sits with Cassandra near the large bonfire as the others drink, dance, and generally make fools of themselves. Suddenly, a group quiets down as Drake approaches the couple, seated near the bonfire. They move aside, clearing a path for Drake as Kyle stands up, turning to face him. Drake does not look pleased to see them together.

“Cass... Kyle...” Drake nods, acknowledging them individually.

“Hello there.” Kyle waves.

Cassandra remains silent, taking a step toward Kyle.

“Look, I’m not here to cause any trouble.” Drake begins.

“Then don’t.” Cassandra quips.

“I never really did think much of you, Kyle, besides your skills with a rifle and a wrench, which I admit are considerable. But... My sister cares about you; you make her happy. I don’t have to like it, but she is an adult, so I have to accept it. I’ll try to make nice so long as you’re together.” Drake extends a hand.

“Alright. I’ve got no quarrel with you.” Kyle replies, shaking Drake’s hand.

“And of course, if you ever hurt my sister, emotionally or otherwise, I’ll gladly rip your head off and stick it on a pole at the front gate.” Drake grins.

“Fair enough.” Kyle chuckles. “But unfortunately for you, I don’t plan on being anything short of a stellar, and hopefully permanent companion to her.”

“Aww, Ky.” She hugs his arm.

The crowd seems to relax as the trio make peace. They sit together around the fire as Drake makes a genuine attempt to get to know Kyle better, something he had never really done before. As they speak, a strange old man approaches. The brown furred Voeldahn has the features of an otter, with a longer rounded snout, short and round ears, and a thick, flexible tail covered in short fur. The man doesn't live in the village, and appears to have been walking the road for some time.

As a Voeldahn, he may come and go freely, while humans would experience a treatment not dissimilar to Kyle's when he first arrived. The crowd sees the strange man, moving away from him like water around a rock as he approaches the group from behind. The man is dressed in a very familiar looking outfit, wearing dirty black slacks and a black long-sleeved button-up shirt, with black Voeldahn dress shoes that are heavily worn and scuffed. Around the collar of his shirt is a white cloth choker. He looks like a Catholic priest.

"Kyle?" The old man speaks.

The three all turn to look at the man standing behind them. Kyle has never seen him before.

"I've been looking for you, Kyle." He continues.

"I'm sorry, sir. Do I know you?" Kyle asks.

"No, but I know you." The priest smiles.

"Uh... From where?" Kyle raises an eyebrow.

"He sent me. He told me where to find you, and it has been quite a journey indeed." The priest continues.

"Who are you?" Drake asks, standing before the priest.

"Just a man, doing His will." He answers.

Kyle and Cassandra stand up, holding hands as Kyle seems apprehensive about the strange man.

"I'm here to tell you that the three you sought for so long are nearby."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Kyle retorts.

"Oh no? A human with a red mohawk, and two Voeldahn; orange and cream tabby fur and solid white fur, both with red hair." The priest grins.

"I'm not looking for them anymore. My life is much better now." Kyle explains.

"How do you even know about them?" Drake demands.

"He told me." The priest points upward.

Cassandra feels Kyle's hand trembling in hers.

“Right... You knew them and they betrayed you, right? They left you with nothing, so now you want revenge? What’s your game, old man!” Drake barks.

“No game. Just doing as He commands.” The priest bows his head.

“Why do you think that I even care?” Kyle scoffs.

“I don’t, but this is simply what He wanted me to tell you. Southeast, five miles away, and in a white barn. If you wait until tomorrow night, it’ll be ten miles away, and in an old warehouse that says ‘Merchants’ on the side in blue paint. Wait any longer and they will be out of your reach forever. Have a blessed evening.” The priest finishes.

He turns to leave the group as they stand in shock.

“Wait!” Kyle speaks up.

The priest slowly turns back.

“Will people get hurt if we don’t do anything about them?” He asks.

“They’re being hurt right now.” The priest answers.

“What would He want me to do about it, if I cared to go?” Kyle asks.

Cassandra grips his hand tightly, silently urging him to reconsider.

“What do *you* think He would want you to do, Kyle?”
The priest poses, before turning back and walking away.

Kyle looks at Cassandra. He gazes into her fearful eyes, reassuringly stroking her cheek. He turns back to the priest, but as quickly as he came, he has vanished. The party continues as though it had never stopped.

“Where the hell did he go?” Drake thinks aloud.

He walks away and looks around several corners, but doesn't see the strange old priest anywhere. He returns to his sister and Kyle, and they all sit back down. Kyle looks at the evening sky. His mind races. He can walk five miles before dark, and still be able to retrace his steps back home, if he had too. Cassandra grips his hand, as though she can read his thoughts. She takes her free hand, resting it on his cheek, turning his face to look at her.

“Please don't.” She murmurs.

She leans in, kissing him tenderly on the lips. He reaches out and hugs her, holding her tightly. He can feel her trembling.

“What if he wasn’t lying? What if people are dying right now because of them?” He poses.

“What if *you* die for this stupid vendetta? I don’t want to lose you, Ky.” Her voice trembles.

“It’s not about that anymore, Cassie. I just don’t want to know that people suffered, and that I could have done something about it. If I find out that barn is real, I don’t know how I’ll be able to sleep at night knowing that I turned my back.” He says, stroking her back softly.

“You *are* a good man. I just want you to stay that way.” She sniffles.

“I’m not going to change on you. I promise. I’m your Kyle today, and I’ll be your Kyle when I come back, and I *will* come back.” Kyle whispers softly into her ear.

“Fine... Then where you go, I go.” She replies proudly.

“Uh-uh. Fuck that. You are not getting my sister caught up in your bullshit!” Drake growls.

“Cassie, I don’t want you to put yourself in danger like that. Stay here where it’s safe.” Kyle pleads.

“No. We’re together now, and I’m not letting my man walk off into the night, alone. If you want to go, you have to take me with you. If you leave me here, I’m just going to

follow you at a distance anyway; I'm already pretty good at that." She grins.

"Damn it, Cassie." He mutters.

"Well, might as well make it a party." Drake comments.

"What?"

"She made it pretty clear how this is going to go down, and I know she means it. Neither of us can stop her. If you are dumb enough to go and take her with you, then I'm going too, to protect her." Drake explains.

Kyle concedes; he won't turn away the help. He doesn't really want to go, and he certainly doesn't want to risk the only person who matters in his life; he feels compelled to investigate, for reasons he can't fully comprehend or explain. They leave the party, returning to Kyle's home to collect his weapons and gear. Kyle takes his pack and sidearms, leaving his rifle behind; daylight is burning, and it'll only slow them down anyway. They quickly head inside Drake's house, to fetch Cassandra's Sig pistol. Drake rushes off to the prison first, before returning to meet them in front of Kyle's home.

"I don't suppose you packed any handcuffs? I'd rather take them alive. Maybe give them a proper trial, or something." Kyle looks to Drake.

"Trial?" Drake raises a brow.

“Or something... I’m kind of winging it here.” Kyle replies.

“Both sets, plus some rope.” Drake comments.

The trio walk towards the gate as the sun creeps ever closer to the horizon.

“Alright... We walk for five miles like he said. If the barn isn’t there, we come straight back before nightfall and never speak of, or think about this again.” Drake grumbles.

“And what if it is there?” Cassandra asks.

“Let’s just hope to God it isn’t.” Kyle answers.

Chapter 8: Cycle

The three walk in the direction that the priest had instructed, keeping a swift pace as the sun quickly begins to set in the distance. After about an hour, the sky has turned a dark blue, with streaks of faded pink and orange peaking over the treetops to the west. In the distance, they see something standing out, its’ white paint is like a neon sign in the twilight. It looks like a large, two-story barn. Though no one speaks aloud, their hearts all sink as they quickly close in on the structure; the priest was right.

Kyle stops them for a second to take off his pack. He checks his Kahr CT9 pistol and H&R 732 revolver, slipping the revolver into the front waistband of his pants, and handing the Kahr to Drake, as he was not carrying a firearm; perhaps he didn't think he would actually need one? He carries his pack in his hand as they approach the barn. From inside, they can hear a strange series of noises. A man grunts, a rope whirs, and someone suddenly sounds as though they are choking.

Kyle drops his pack and races into the barn, met with a horrible sight. Inside the barn is one of the four men he was looking for, holding a rope tightly with both hands. The white furred Voeldahn grins as he looks up at the rafters. A Caucasian human boy in his early teens, dangles by his neck as he kicks his feet and thrashes about like a fish pulled out of water, the noose pulled tightly around his throat. Drake and Cassandra quickly enter behind him. Without hesitation, Kyle rushes the Voeldahn, who doesn't seem to notice him just off to the side.

He tackles the man and knocks him to the ground, the rope slipping from his hands as the boy falls onto the dirt with a loud thud. Drake and Cassandra rush to aid the boy as Kyle punches the Voeldahn in the face several times and attempts to draw his pistol, intending on taking the man alive. He is suddenly shocked by a stinging in his arm as the Voeldahn slashes at him with a large knife. Kyle jumps

back, a small, one-inch gash in his upper right arm as the man attacks him, swinging the knife wildly.

Kyle rushes to the side as he slashes and stabs at him. He falls back and brings up a foot, kicking the man in the gut. Instead of falling back, he falls forward, landing atop Kyle and struggling to bring the knife to his throat. Cassandra cries out his name as she lunges onto the man's back. He throws her off and she stumbles back, but as she falls away, the man, now kneeling over Kyle, leaves his entire torso exposed. Drake doesn't hesitate, firing several rounds into the man and dropping him dead on the ground beside Kyle.

"Are you alright?!" Cassandra cries out, rushing to his aid.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Kylee replies, holding her tightly.

He can't believe he was nearly killed, and with very little effort by the man, armed with only a knife. He wonders if this is a fight he can even continue, but he won't voice it. He has come too far to turn back, and he doesn't want to look like a coward in front of Cassandra, or Drake. Drake helps the boy, taking the rope from his neck. The boy can barely speak, his voice hoarse and his breathing labored. Drake looks at the rafters, his mouth dropping in horror as Kyle and Cassandra follow his gaze.

Swinging from the ceiling are three more bodies, suspended high off the ground; an adult human male, an adult human female, and an even younger human boy. As the teenager regains his strength, he reveals his sad story. He had been living with his family in peace until the raiders came. There were three, two Voeldahn men, and a human with a mohawk; all of them had red hair. The white furred Voeldahn stayed to 'play' with them, while the other two merely robbed them of food and water, leaving for their future campsite. Believing the boy to soon be dead, they described the location to the sadist, a cliffside barely a mile from the barn. The boy points the way.

Drake offers to bring the boy back to their village as a refugee. Now left with nothing, the boy eagerly accepts the offer from his saviors. Knowing that the other raiders are close by, and within his reach, Kyle is eager to capture them. The boy, however, appears too weak to come along. Knowing this, Kyle takes his thirty-two-caliber revolver from his waistband and hands it over to the boy, should the two raiders return while they are away.

"Hold it right there!" Drake yells at Kyle.

"What?"

"What are you doing, giving him that gun?!" He scolds Kyle.

“We have to bring them in, but I don’t think he can come along in his condition. It’s for his protection until we can return.” Kyle explains.

“Fuck that. This is over!” Drake snarls.

“How can you say that?! Did you see what they did to his family?! You know what they did to mine, and to Vernon! Everyone here has lost someone important to them, except you! This won’t stop until we bring them in!” Kyle yells back.

“Then you do it without me.” Drake tosses him both sets of handcuffs.

“Drake!” Cassandra yells at her brother.

“And you aren’t going!” Drake commands, pointing a finger at her.

She takes a step toward Kyle defiantly, but Drake aims the Kahr pistol, pointing Kyle’s own weapon it at him. Kyle raises his hands, his Smith and Wesson pistol still holstered at his side.

“What are you doing?!” Cassandra screams.

“Keeping you alive. This isn’t our fight.” Drake grumbles.

“Cassie...” Kyle calls out to her, softly.

She turns to him, stepping up to him as she stands in front of the gun, shielding Kyle from Drake. Kyle holds her tightly, their cheeks pressed together as he rubs her back softly. He kisses her cheek, then moves around to her lips. Drake watches his sister and her lover trade kiss after passionate kiss. They soon stop, keeping their noses pressed together.

“Cassie, I want you to stay here with Drake and the boy. I don’t want you to come.” He says softly.

“But, Ky!” Her voice trembles.

“I’ll be okay, but I won’t if anything happens to you. You are all that I have that is good in my life, and I wouldn’t ever risk you. You need to stay. I need you to stay.” He continues.

Drake lowers the pistol as Kyle speaks to his sister. He underestimated Kyle’s compassion, and his feelings for Cassandra, assuming that their relationship was one-sided, or even purely physical. He suddenly feels ashamed for what he’s done.

“Kyle... I-” Cassandra stammers.

“I love you, Cassie.” He quickly interjects.

Her tail sways slowly, and wraps around her side and hooking behind his back. She nuzzles his neck with here snout.

"I love you too, Ky. But you said it first... I wanted to say it first." She pouts adorably.

"I know. You can punish me later." He teases.

"I will..." She coos.

"Hey, Kyle..." Drake begins.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry... For not trusting you with my sister, or being nicer to you all that time..." Drake says sincerely, a solemn look on his face.

"It's alright. Forgive and forget. Besides, you've got plenty of time to make it up to me." He smirks.

Leaving the group behind, Kyle runs off toward the direction of the cliff. At his swift pace, he'll close the mile in mere minutes. Just as the boy had said, Kyle finds a sloping hill that reaches to a cliff. He can see two figures from a distance as they prepare a campsite, building a small fire and staking down a fabric tent. Drawing his pistol preemptively, he approaches the gang's camp. He confronts them, with every intention of taking them both alive.

“Hold it right there!” Kyle demands, his sidearm aimed at the two unarmed men.

The human with the red mohawk looks to Kyle as he kneels by the campfire. The orange and cream tabby Voeldahn kneels by the tent, a mallet in his hand. They stare at each other tensely. Kyle keeps his distance from the men.

“I’ve been looking for you two.” Kyle grins.

The human reaches down.

“Ah! No moving. Just breath.” Kyle orders.

“Can’t I stand up before you kill me?” He asks.

“For one, I’m not here to kill you, and for two, you can stand up without touching the ground with your hands.” Kyle answers.

“I have bad knees.”

“Too fucking bad. No means no.” Kyle remarks.

“Fine...”

He slowly begins to stand, his hands not touching the ground. He suddenly lunges over as Kyle fires a shot,

striking the man in the left arm as he grabs a gun with his right hand. He turns and fires two poorly aimed shots from a Taurus 941 .22 Magnum revolver. Kyle fires again, striking the man's right forearm. He groans in pain and drops the revolver to the ground as he falls down to his knees.

"Damn... I was aiming for the gun! I'm getting a little rusty." Kyle comments, taunting the raiders.

The Voeldahn drops the mallet, standing up and facing Kyle with both hands held high in the air.

"That's better. Why couldn't you just do that from the start?" He asks the human.

"Fuck you..." The human grumbles.

"Now that isn't nice. Do the honors..." Kyle tosses down both sets of handcuffs.

"You're taking us alive?!" The Voeldahn asks in shock.

"I sure am. You've got a trial to go to, and quite possibly the end of a rope, or a burning stake." Kyle smirks. "Now do what I tell you and stop making this so hard..."

The human groans and leans over, a large quantity of blood running from his wrist.

“I think I’m fucking dying here man... I feel woozy.” He croaks.

He falls over onto his face, groaning in agony. He soon stops groaning, and doesn’t even move. The Voeldahn yells at him, as does Kyle, but he doesn’t answer. Kyle begins to worry; he didn’t want to kill him. Kyle slowly approaches the human, his pistol pulled close to his body. He is within kicking distance when the human suddenly lunges at Kyle. He tackles Kyle, who is surprised by his strength and speed. He falls back and loses his pistol, which tumbles away. The human’s right hand is not fully functional, but he tries to punch Kyle with his left fist.

Kyle blocks the hits and pushes the man off him as the Voeldahn rushes to help his comrade. Without warning, Drake fires a round in the air as the men stop. Kyle scrambles to his feet and takes the Taurus revolver from the ground, stumbling back from the men as he aims at them. Drake approaches, wearing Kyle’s musette bag. Cassandra rushes up to him.

“Thank God you arrived. I didn’t think I was going to make it!” Kyle exclaims.

“You’re safe now, Ky.” Cassandra coos, wrapping her arms around him.

“You let her come, after what I said?!” Kyle barks at Drake.

“I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter... You know you can’t argue with her...” Drake shrugs.

“I love you, Cassie.” Kyle says as he kisses her lovingly.

“Real fuckin’ sweet. Can we go now?” The Voeldahn asks.

The vigilantes look at each other for a moment; they look as though they are about to laugh.

“Seriously?!” Drake chuckles.

“We aren’t here to kill you; we’re taking you in for a proper trial and punishment... Now put on the damn handcuffs.” Kyle sternly demands, pointing the little revolver at the men.

The human cuffs himself, no longer willing to fight. His Voeldahn companion soon follows.

“You know, I have chased you down for almost two months, and for the longest time, all I could think of was skinning you all alive...” Kyle begins as he hears the handcuffs clicking. “You killed my mother, father, girlfriend, and my dog. I organized a posse to kill you all, but four of you escaped...”

“Oh yeah! I remember that!” The leader grins.

“You killed her boyfriend and comrades, killed this boy’s family, and God knows how many others.” Kyle continues.

“Actually, Sven killed that boy’s family. We just didn’t care to stop him.” The human grumbles.

“Right after we found her little crew, we came across two girls living in a small shack near the road.” The Voeldahn narrows his eyes sinisterly.

“Oh yeah... Raped them raw for over a week.” The human chuckles weakly.

“I think I once actually came pure air.” The Voeldahn snickers.

Cassandra turns away from the men, clutching Kyle tightly. She is obviously disturbed by their perverse gloating.

“Listen you sick fucks, after meeting her and living a peaceful life again, I took the time to reflect... I forgive you for what you did to me, but you need to be taken in.” Kyle speaks.

The Voeldahn laughs.

“You killed my friends to tell me that shit?!” He yells.

Kyle simply nods.

“So, you get yourself a nice Voeldahn whore to wet your dick in, and now life is all good? And what about you, sweet cheeks? How did you even survive Kenneth? And then to go and pick a human lover...” The Voeldahn mocks them.

Cassandra seems more embarrassed than upset.

“It’s alright, Cassie. You know I love you, girl. Everything is going to be okay now.” Kyle says with a warm smile, quickly comforting his lover.

“Real fuckin’ cute... Well... Damn you, your Voeldahn bitch, and your fuckin’ mercy!” Orange yells.

Kyle grows tired of his raving and opens his mouth to speak, hoping to ask Drake if he has anything to gag them with. Before he can utter a single syllable, the boy begins firing the thirty-two-caliber revolver at the defenseless prisoners. The Voeldahn and his human companion are struck several times, falling over as they are shot dead by the boy. The teenager clutches the H&R revolver, holding it tightly in his hand as he trembles. They turn back in shock. Kyle looks solemnly at the boy, and takes the empty, smoking revolver from his hand. They stand there in silence for a moment.

“Do you feel better now that you’ve killed them?” Kyle asks.

“No...” The boy laments as he lowers his head.

“Yeah... Neither did I...” He adds.

Cassandra approaches them, resting a hand on Kyle’s shoulder and leaning in. He slips an arm around her and holds her close as she hugs him.

“Let’s go home now.” She coos.

Drake removes the handcuffs from the bodies. He turns back and begins to leave, picking up Kyle’s Smith and Wesson pistol as he passes it. He waits for the others, looking back over his shoulder. Cassandra, Kyle and the boy quickly catch up. As they leave the bodies to rot on the cliffside, Cassandra looks over to Kyle, smiling up at him.

“What’s up, Cassie?” He finally asks her.

“I’m just proud of you for being so strong.” She replies.

“All of my strength comes from you. If it wasn’t for you, I would have let my hate drag me down.” He admits.

He leans in, and they share a long kiss. He slides his hand around hers. Smiling wide, she gives his hand a loving squeeze. They head for home as the sun sets below the trees. Though it is now night, they walk confidently; they know that they will have a bright tomorrow.