

JAMES ESPARZA PRESENTS

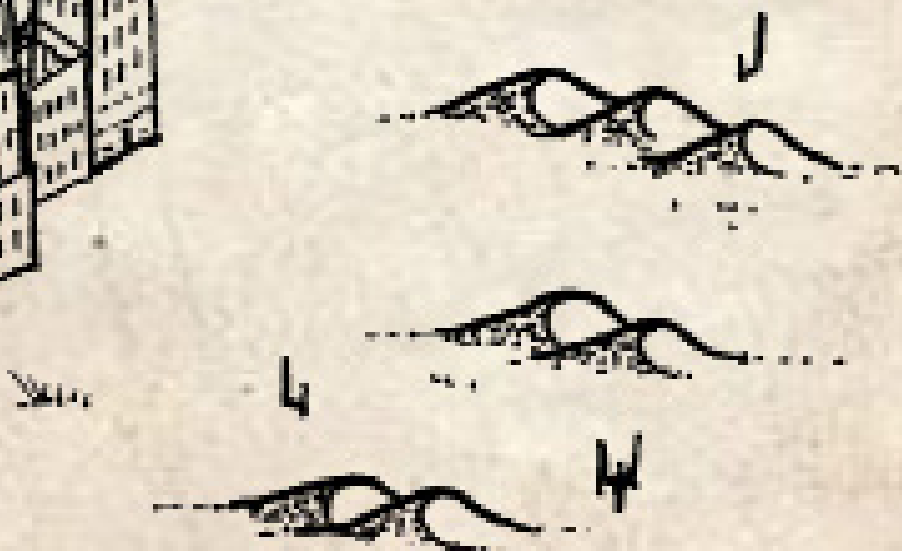
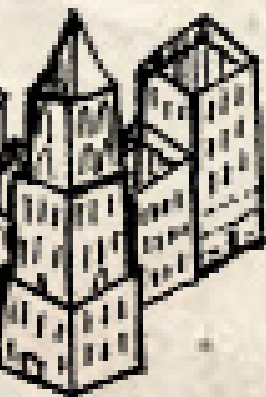
**WORLD
WITHOUT
END**

**TERROR AT
THE GATES**

A SHORT STORY



dom of Whitlow



WORLD WITHOUT END

A Fantasy/Sci-Fi world full of diverse landscapes and interesting, unique civilizations that strive to exist in a world of both ancient kingdoms and futuristic cities. Technological wonders built decades ago, and mystical creations that live and breathe together in this ever-evolving world of adventure and terror.

These Lands of Light stand as a single bot of illumination on an endless plain of darkness. The kingdoms of light ravaged by war for ages. Countless nations and people vanished, leaving nothing but ruins and bones behind. It was only when the darkness known as the abyss sprang to life, assaulting the single territory of light from all directions, that the three ruling kingdoms were forced to unite their ancient powers and cutting-edge technologies to survive.

Decades passed, yet the ceaseless assault persisted, and an official declaration of war against the darkness itself was made. New borders were drawn, and the kingdoms forged pacts of trade and focused on economy and knowledge. Amidst the chaos of constant warfare, an era of adventure dawned. The three kingdoms opened their borders to one another, trading goods and ideas, while intellectuals and warriors braved the untamed regions of light, confronting rogue factions and fighting against the encroaching darkness.

In the dorm of the medical ward, harsh, heavy winds swept wicked snow across the frozen landscape, lurking beyond the fortified walls of Vehicle Outpost 13, a military fortress, specializing in the repair and storage of vital vehicles and unitions. A slender, pale man with short, dark hair sat thinking of the unforgiving howls of the strong winds. The dread of those walls collapsing, leaving the facility's men exposed to the elements, consumed Comms Officer Lew's thoughts. He sat up, gazing at the pale eggshell white walls of the ward, just as Doctor Gregory entered, wearing his customary pen and pad smile that seemed out of place on his gloomy face. "Well, it appears that once again, your medical exams have revealed no health concerns."

"You said the exact same thing last time, Gregory. You say that often?"

"What can I say? I don't think I can offer the kind of medicine you might be seeking just because you're my number one patient."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lew asked.

The doctor removed his glasses and ran his hand through his thinning hair. "It means they should have assigned me a therapist instead of another nurse."

"Thanks, Doc. I can always count on you..."

"What would you like me to say, huh? Should I lie and tell you it's some kind of cancer?"

"Where are you even getting a thought like that?" Lew crossed his arms. "Though, do you think that might get me out of here sooner rather than later?"

"That's not my point, what do you expect from me? I can name

every bone in your body, but trust me, you don't need life advice from this Doc beyond the medical stuff, my friend. I'm no therapist."

"I hear you, but this place isn't normal. It's not meant for humans, Doc... It feels like the entire world is collapsing sometimes, going eerily silent. Just the other day, a station went completely silent. Science Outpost 13, the very reason they placed a vehicle outpost way out here. All those white coats running about as soldiers die, searching for their undead specimens in the dark."

"Hope you're not sharing this kind of talk with the men, Lew."

Lew locked eyes with the doctor. "I'm worried about what it might be doing to us."

Gregory took a seat next to the young officer. "Lew, we've both been stuck here for a while. What you're feeling is normal, we all feel it, and you're far from the only patient to come in here with these symptoms." Gregory rubbed his head again. "I know how you feel, trust me. You should spend more time with the men, no need to waste your military career visiting a stuffy old doctor. Get some rest. Those are my orders."

Lew departed from the ward moments after. Beyond the ward, the outpost's interior transformed into a typical dark gray, covering the sturdy metal-grated floors and enclosing metal walls. Reminiscent of the familiar barracks within the sprawling facility's he had spent his entire career in, serving the Whitlonian Armed Forces. It was an official governmental force, albeit one known for its ragtag nature.

As he passed the barracks where the men were housed, the haunting whispers of the outside wind ceased, replaced by the

boisterous laughter and enthusiastic banter of the guardsmen, eager for action. Lew peered into the entrance of the Ready-Barracks, where he found an atmosphere reminiscent of a bar. Soldiers of varying ranks and backgrounds occupied tables scattered throughout the spacious room, each engaged in leisurely activities. Among them sat the ever-present Sergeant Kane Brikter, a tall man made mostly of muscle, who commanded the respect of everyone in uniform.

Kane and Lew locked eyes briefly, their expressions marked by discontent. Kane emitted a growl akin to that of a predatory canine, directed at the Comms Officer. It served as a warning, propelling Lew to continue toward his own corner of the outpost. As Lew walked past, the men seated at Kane's table glanced toward their fellow soldier. Holding a hand of cards, Kane conveyed a message without uttering a single word. The glare in his eyes made it abundantly clear, they shouldn't even think of asking. It was a silent command for them to refocus on their interrupted card game.

Most of his fellow soldiers sitting at the table, Peterson, Hector, and Julian knew the drill. Then there was the new private who couldn't read a room. Private Cole leaned in, locking eyes with his laidback commanding officer, and ventured, "So, um, what was that about?"

"Don't!" Specialist Peterson urged him.

"Let the idiot be an idiot," Corporal Hector replied. "Better in here before he runs into an undead Class 2 out there in the cold dark."

Kane entertained the question as others focused on their cards, his response dry but laced with a hint of amusement. "This place, The Ready-Barracks, is for people who spill blood on behalf of our

mighty government. You ever spill any, rookie?"

"He's a cool kid, just needs to learn some manners is all," Peterson defended Cole.

Kane gave Peterson one final glance.

"You know what, I fold. I think I'm going to get something to drink." Peterson rose from his seat and scampered off.

Private First Class Julian let out a chuckle, "Peterson likes you, Cole, that's cute. I think the commander asked you a question, though." Julian rubbed his cards together as he lightly licked his lips. His eyes glanced at the men at the nearby table, then over to Peterson at the bar, but he wasn't really looking at Peterson. He was looking at Private First Class Gallows, the beautiful dirty blonde with curly hair he couldn't keep his eyes off of. Just as she couldn't keep her eyes off him, Gallows returned his glance and gave him a light smile.

Private Cole furrowed his brows, taken aback, and cleared his throat nervously. "That's why I'm here, sir."

Julian sat as low in his seat as he could, patiently awaiting his moment.

"No, you're here to keep your blood from being spilled. If you were a killer you'd be out there on patrol with the rest of the rookies, getting your guts ripped out by a zombie like you're supposed to," Kane said.

"What?... Sir, I mean..." Cole replied.

"Damn rookie, you're a stupid stubborn bastard. I kinda like a stubborn bastard!" Kane reclined in his chair, his stern expression softening. "That guy comes around time and again." His eyes

glance towards the door where Lew stood. “He leans up against the wall and rests, I think all this noise drowns out the wind, sometimes I’ll order him about, even though he’s an officer he’ll do what he’s told. I don’t blame him, but these barracks are for men leaving on patrol, or ready to reinforce at a moment’s notice, it’s for soldiers who spill blood... Why don’t you go practice your aim at the range, Private Cole?”

Julian leaned in as the rookie sat frozen, playing a winning hand, sending a sigh across the table. “If there’s anything I’m good at it’s cards,” Julian bragged. “And long range sniping.”

“Is that why you’re so far away from the ladies?” Hector replied.

“I can take the head off a zombie from 200 yards with iron sights baby,” Julian said as he collected his winnings. “I’m a lucky man, stick around, it’ll rub off, Hector.” He turned away from the table and eyed Gallows walking towards the stock room, meaning she was ready for some alone time. “I’m going to take a piss,” Julian continued, making a window for Cole to exit.

Cole hastened out of the Ready-Barracks. Just as the door swung open to allow his exit, he came to an abrupt halt, startled by the sight of Lew leaning casually against the wall. A small yelp escaped the private's lips, provoking a hearty round of laughter from the others at the table. They turned and spotted Lew, whose presence sent a wave of embarrassment coursing down Lew’s spine, before he made a hasty retreat towards his command post, where he was met with scant comfort.

The comms center felt cramped, the walls covered in an assortment of heavy, mechanical instruments. His subordinates bustled at their stations, their faces etched with a look of boredom as they slowly

reached for communication panels, ready to respond to vehicular distress calls from stations and snowed over dirt roads across the area.

"Sir!" his second-in-command called, striding over with a stack of written updates clutched in his hand. Lew flipped through the many pages, as his second-in-command narrated the contents. Most of the information consisted of mundane details, but amidst the clutter of facts and figures, his subordinate eventually voiced the crucial information Lew sought.

"We're still in the dark regarding communication with our sister station. We've set up a loop message for them and moved on to other stations to monitor."

Lew hoped they would have heard from Science Outpost 13, an outpost of that size rarely had relay issues such as these in near any weather. Lew let out a slow sigh before he replied, "Contact Communication Outpost 13, they'll have a better chance reaching them than us."

"Sir, I think you'll want to see this," a voice arose from one of the communication workstations.

They crowded around a small screen as the men saw their sensors pick up a long range transport moving their way. "It's vehicle ID matches the Science Outpost, sir."

123 Miles East of Vehicle Outpost 13:

Shrouded in darkness and blanketed by snow, two transports pushed forward through the raging storm. Its sturdy wheels were designed to conquer such nightmarish conditions, and the vehicle itself was engineered to withstand the harshest of challenges. Inside the lead transport, the crew's fatigue and injuries were evident. Their faces bore the marks of exhaustion and hardship, and only a select few seemed to have weathered the journey in relatively good shape.

In the cockpit, the driver surged ahead at full throttle, a risky maneuver born out of necessity. The danger they fled from was a relentless specter, and the crew anticipated the enemy's arrival, their only uncertainty was the timing of the impending attack.

In the passenger seat of the cockpit a soldier sat, his armor torn and flesh injured. "We will make it," he muttered, "we gotta."

Their relatively short range radio finally crackled to life.

"This is an official message from VO-13 comms center, please contact us on official channels. This is a recording," the message began to repeat.

They smiled and shared a gaze of hope with one another, The injured soldier quickly replied as instructed. "We're survivors from the Science Outpost 13 assault. They're everywhere. We need to evacuate immediately, no single fortress can stand a chance."

A reply came in moments later, "This is Comms Officer Lew Soon, we're patching you to our Commander, did you say assault?"

“Yes!” the passenger swiftly replied, “the outpost is lost, SO-13 is lost, we are the only survivors. Please tell me the transports are running.”

“Last time I checked. You’re patched in, Commander Fairhart.”

“Copy,” Fairhart said. “This is Commander Fairhart of Vehicle Outpost 13, inform me of the ongoing situation!”

The passenger lifted the mic to his mouth when something before him caught his attention. The smile written across the man’s face was wiped away as a strange shape appeared through the dark snow in front of them. A single dark figure stood in the storm, and as the vehicles raced forward, another appeared, and then another...

Within Vehicle Outpost 13:

Lew and Commander Fairhart both heard a response just before all communication abruptly ceased. "No," came the chilling words, “We’re too late.”

“Hello? Come in Transport? Transport, come in?” Fairhart’s voice urged.

As an officer, Fairhart disciplined his emotional reactions and ran his thoughts through a mental filter, considering all the variables at play. There were countless factors that could interfere with a signal in this harsh environment, especially during this relentless weather. Their vehicle class was more than capable of enduring a storm of this magnitude, a far cry from the aging air transports they would be employing for the rescue mission. Though their cryptic last

words were of warning and despair.

After much consideration Commander Fairhart leaned close to his microphone, "Officer Lew Soon, we need to dispatch an emergency team."

"Yes, sir," Lew replied from the comms center, he turned as his mind went blank, he knew there was something expected of him but Lew's hesitance shrouded his thoughts.

"Lew?!?" Fairhart asked.

The comms officer snapped out of it as his training rushed back to him. He remembered a switch at his command station, "Yes sir, minor issue that has been resolved," he replied before making his way and quickly hitting the switch. Such an action was rare, but Lew was sure this was protocol.

Through the automatic circuitry, the Ready-Barracks were linked to the connected line, forming a direct connection between Lew, Commander Fairhart, and the barracks where Kane Brikter and his squad of men sat playing cards.

Lew sat up and let out a sigh, there was a protocol for everything and all it took was confidence, at least that's what his drill sergeant used to say during basic. "Okay, sir, we are connec—"

"The moment the storm clears, that is!" Fairhart said aloud. "We have limited transports here, and given the severity of the weather, if it was an accident I doubt any soldiers or staff would survive long enough for us to reach them. So don't contact the guardsmen yet."

His words echoed through the barracks, prompting a number of soldiers to stand up and cuss at the intercom. Kane marched to the

intercom and smashed the receiver with his hand. "What's all this about?!?" he blared without regard for rank.

The commander was taken back at the startling sound of Kane's voice. "Sergeant? Clear the Comms!" Fairhart commanded.

"What do you mean? You're the one that switched the emergency broadcast!" Kane replied.

Fairhart shifted his gaze toward one of the numerous screens where a series of flashing words drew his attention: "Connected to Emergency Broadcast Network."

Turning back to the mic, Fairhart issued his command in a firm, authoritative tone. "Officer Lew Soon, report to my office immediately, all others stand down."

Now that he knew he had Lew on the line, Kane couldn't resist the urge to exert his dominance. "Lew, what's happening? Tell me, right now!"

"What are you doing Sergeant, where's the lieutenant!?" Fairhart asked.

Feeling somewhat shocked by the authority exerted over him, Lew instinctively covered his mouth and hesitated.

"The LT is drunk, sir. Lew, speak..." Kane urged.

Before Fairhart could reply, Lew's mouth blurted out, "We lost their signal, and I think they need emergency assistance at these coordinates." Like a machine Lew's hands went to work, typing and sending the coordinates directly to the Ready-Barracks.

"Damn it, Lew!" Fairhart turned to his master control system and severed the connection between the barracks and the comms

center, leaving Lew on the line with him. "You're going to have to explain why you were willing to ruin your career for this."

"Because..." The comms officers mind went blank for a moment, and the urge for mischief faded, replaced by a dark pit in his stomach. "Sir, I believe it was the right thing to do," he said, a bit unsure of himself.

Fairhart's voice carried disappointment. "Lew, you're demoted to Ward Hand, Private First Class. Just until I can arrange your transfer out of here," he announced. "Since you spend so much time at the medical ward you can spend the remainder of your stay with us there. Private."

A trace of mischief crept back into Soon, leaving a sly remark dancing on his lips, one he couldn't resist letting slip. "That's Private First Class, sir." With that, he severed their connection and savored what little time remained in the comforting confines of his cramped comms center.

Lew exhaled and sunk into his seat, his eyes exploring the variety of small nicknacks and mechanical pencils that he so often took for granted. "Is this really all there was?" he said aloud, drawing some attention but not enough to disturb the atmosphere of the comms station. He nodded at his men, a silent order to return to duty as he packed his things.

An hour later, guards escorted him to his new barracks, where his belongings were already scattered, courtesy of a lack of discipline among most of the ranks. Before he could settle into his disrupted quarters, an unexpected visitor arrived. Beyond the open doors of his room, Commander Fairhart stood waiting. The two locked eyes, sharing a mutual look of displeasure. "I hope you understand

why I had to take this step," Fairhart began.

"I understand, sir. I violated orders egregiously," Lew admitted.

"In front of an entire barracks of soldiers, not to mention anyone else who might have been listening," Fairhart continued, stepping closer. "I did that because I can't afford anyone else pulling stunts. I've already got a drunk lieutenant, and Kane Brikter to worry about, I didn't think I had to worry about you..."

Lew kept his gaze upon his commanding officer, Before he could speak, the sound of heavy mechanical doors opening interrupted them.

They both turned and peered through the window of Lew's new quarters, witnessing the bright lights of three fortified rescue cruisers rolling out of the base and into the desolate wastelands beyond.

"Who in their right mind..." Fairhart began, his voice trailing off as he arrived at an assumed answer. "It's that damn, Brikter. It has to be." The Commander turned and swiftly exited the room before he could finish his prepared speech. He pulled out a comms device as he did so, blaring over the mic for answers.

Lew's breath escaped in a hushed sigh, perched on the edge of his bed, a sense of burden pressing upon him like a heavy weight. He leaned towards the window, his gaze fixed on the desolate landscape, where the lights of the moving vehicles were already out of sight.

10 Miles Away from Vehicle Outpost 13:

Kane occupied the passenger seat in the lead vehicle, hurtling toward the specified coordinates. Within the narrow confines of his militaristic world, all that mattered to him were the lives of the young soldiers sent to endure the frozen wasteland in the name of science and discovery.

“You sure this is worth it, Sarge?” Hector asked from behind the wheel, while they plowed through the nightmarish terrain.

“Every soldier’s worth it Hector.” Kane double checked his sidearm.

“That include the rookie in the back, he’s pretty skittish. Not sure we should have brought him,” Hector replied.

“You mean Private Cole? He needs the training, besides, he’s safer by our side, with the lieutenant as drunk as he is, some of the wilder guardsmen would rough up a young stick like Cole.”

“Toughen him up in the frost huh, Sarge?”

“Just like I did with you in the desert, now keep your eyes on the road. There’re a lot of unnatural things out here.”

They raced across the desolate wasteland for hours, but the unyielding storm showed no signs of abating. The terrain gradually shifted as their already dark surroundings grew even darker.

The frontier lay ahead, an unexplored region beyond the lands of light, a realm cloaked in absolute blackness where nothing could be discerned. Even Kane couldn't escape the eerie sense of despair, a primal instinct urging them to turn back, to flee from this inhospitable realm. Still, they pressed on.

The convoy of three vehicles rolled to a halt at the designated coordinates, and the grim aftermath of the crash was starkly apparent. The wreckage sprawled in bizarre configurations, defying any natural explanation. As the massive vehicles gradually slowed down, they formed a protective ring around the chaotic scene.

In the midst of this, Kane exchanged a puzzled glance with Hector. Both of them sensed a pervasive strangeness, as if they had witnessed an omen.

According to their instruments, the temperature showed signs of a gradual increase, allowing them to venture out safely for approximately ten minute intervals. Each rescuer was donned in a formidable, combat ready temperature-regulating suit, classified as Class 3. It was just one level short of being fully suitable for deployment in such an environment.

The men quickly disembarked, employing the beams of their combat rifles to accentuate the already well-lit surroundings.

Private First Class Julian awed at the crash site, “Looks like we got two vehicles here, sir!”

Specialist Peterson stood next to him, peering into the wrecked interior of the vehicle, “They must have been going top speed, let’s not waste time.”

From the rear of the vehicle, their technical wizard, Tommie, was carrying some toys. He tapped his wrist monitor, and two small drones detached from his hefty backpack. "I love these little things, quite sophisticated devices, top-of-the-line security protocol. I call them 'search, and secure, and or destroy bots'."

The drones flew off to the two separate crashes. The first vehicle

was scanned, showing no signs of life. The second vehicle also showed no signs of life but picked up a faint heat signature within. Once the scans were complete, the drones began to create a perimeter line and patrolled it.

Gallows and Julian started their approach toward the first vehicle as the scan was taking place, while Hector and Kane moved in on the second.

A significant section of the first vehicle had been brutally torn asunder, and debris was strewn about, scattered far beyond the reach of their piercing beams of light.

Their squad medic, Gallows was the first to enter the vehicle, with Julian right behind her. She flashed the light attached to her sidearm around the bloody wreckage, scanning every section of the large interior. “Sir,” she called over the squad’s short range comms, “something strange, there’s no bodies, plenty of frosted over blood though.” She muted her mic. “This place is creepy Jules.”

He muted his mic as well, whispering, "You know I always got your back. Why don't you let me take point?"

“Medics first, if there is someone in here I need to secure them, it’s the calling,” she said.

“Calling, huh?” Julian replied.

“You heard it right Jules, calling.”

The two of them locked eyes, Julian giving her a coy look riddled with confidence.

“We will rendezvous back in the stockroom if everything isn’t, you know, icky,” Gallows said before turning her comms back on.

“Never the kind to leave a guy behind.” Julian followed suit,

maintaining eye contact with her the whole time.

“Copy that, I’m breaching the secondary vehicle.” Kane looked over his shoulder and saw Cole gawking into the surrounding darkness, “Private, don’t wander off, we’re on a damn rescue mission!”

Cole looked back with wide eyes peering through his thermal mask. “Yes, sir!” He waddled towards the vehicle as Kane made his way inside. The interior was dead, there was wreckage everywhere, and plenty of bodies, scattered about in a horrific fashion. Yet as he proceeded towards the rear of the vehicle, something caught his eye.

To his surprise, he beheld a solitary soldier, huddled by a meager, makeshift fire. The low flame revealed a circle of lifeless soldiers, each taken by frost, their still forms piled around the sole survivor like a grotesque shield. He shrank, cowering behind the flickering flames, his fingers desperately clutching the cold, frost covered wall.

When the dim light of his flame illuminated the life in their eyes his cries settled and turned to an intense relief, “Yes, help, please! They’re going to return, we must leave. Please help me!”

“Gallows we got a survivor; get your ass here now!” Kane blared.

“Sounds like things just got icky,” she replied.

They ushered him into the interior of the second cruiser, where they worked to provide comfort to the disoriented, muttering man who trembled and withdrew. It was evident that he was deeply troubled, and the team's medic did her best in the way of drugs, but his mind was beyond disturbed.

11 Hours Later, Within Vehicle Outpost 13's Medical Ward:

The injured man's heavy eyelids slowly lifted, and his senses were instantly assaulted by the harsh fluorescent lights of the medical ward. Murmurs and movements of various individuals surrounded him. In a voice parched and cracked, he inquired, "Where am I?"

A doctor with thinning hair peered at him over his spectacles and replied, "You're safe now. You're at Vehicle Outpost 13. I'm Doctor Gregory. How do you feel?"

"Tired. My body aches..."

"You've endured a lot of stress. You have various bruises and scratches, but nothing life threatening."

"Life threatening... The zombies, they're out there. The undead, they're legion..." his voice dwindled as he spoke, ending in a near whisper.

"Did they attack SO-13?" Commander Fairhart's voice interjected from behind the doctor.

Turning his head to address the officer, the injured man slowly nodded. "Everyone's gone now. They're on their way here."

"What's your name soldier?"

"Richard, Haymond."

"I think that's enough." Gregory said. "Richard needs his rest. You can question him after."

Fairhart left, promptly returning to his sanctuary, the base

command center. There, he secluded himself and settled into his chair, and peered over the many screens that surrounded him.

A familiar twinge of embarrassment washed over Fairhart as he reflected on his oversight; he couldn't believe he had forgotten about the rescue cruisers. That was the very reason they were stationed there, though they hadn't been needed for months. While storms of that magnitude were rare, the vehicles had sat idle for a long while; it was a miracle that they started at all." Fairhart pondered aloud, "It would be a reasonable assumption for any prudent commander that such vehicles couldn't be relied upon. Kane's impulsive maneuvers could have cost them their lives." If he had returned with no survivors Fairhart would have demoted him on the spot, but he was far too popular among the men for such things. Now he was a hero, and out here that mattered.

He made a mental note to pursue Kane's dismissal from the Whitlonian Armed Forces once the initial buzz surrounding his recent accomplishment had subsided, besides his recent heroics he had made plenty of public showings of insubordination in the past. To retreat from embarrassment, he concentrated on the unfolding developments. Fairhart reached out to the new Communications Officer and issued an order for half a dozen spy drones to be dispatched to SO-13 and another half-dozen to scour the surrounding area for any signs of undead activity.

He massaged the back of his head, sinking into his seat, his voice tinged with regret. "That Kane's been a pain in my ass since he got here. This used to such a peaceful station."

The Medical Ward:

As their injured guest, Richard had made a surprisingly swift recovery. He now sat up in his bed, still trembling but remarkably composed. "I can't thank you all enough for saving me... I thought it was all over."

"You're in pretty good shape for someone who's been through so much. Not even a broken bone. Fairhart will have plenty of questions for you, Richard. I thought it best to let you have some peace before that happens. Would you like some jello, perhaps?" Dr. Gregory offered.

Richard managed a smile. "No. This is Vehicle Outpost 13, right?" he inquired. "We need to put more distance between us and them."

Dr. Gregory took off his glasses, "Why do you say that?" He knew what he warned was true to some extent but the wounded man was clearly suffering from mental trauma, something he regretted having to deal with so much.

"Those zombies, the undead. I don't know how they did it at Science Outpost 13, but..." Richard's voice trailed off as a haunting expression darkened his face. "They killed everybody, they attacked from the inside first. Splitting everyone into groups and started attacking from the outside, then the explosions..."

"They assaulted from the interior?" Gregory inquired.

Richard replied with a slow nod, and mumbling words. "They broke communication first, then people went missing."

Dr. Gregory regarded him with equal concern, pondering whether to finally report his well being. It could be the delusions of a traumatized man, but given the circumstances, he decided to act. Rising from his seat, he said, "Look, I understand you've been through a lot, but I think you'll have to share this with our commanding officer sooner rather than later. You're recovering remarkably quickly."

Richard responded with a slow nod, his haunted expression persisting.

Gregory gave him a kind smile, "I'll be back. Get what rest you can, alright?"

Exiting the patient's room, the doctor gazed down a lengthy, well-lit corridor where Lew diligently swept the mildly soiled floor. He offered a wave of acknowledgment to his friend but couldn't help feeling a touch of sorrow for his predicament. Without time for more than a brief greeting, he headed toward the staff room which housed a phone connected to their emergency wireless network. Deemed to be the most secure means of communication by the big brains of the military.

Unsurprisingly, the connection failed to yield even a dial tone. "Of course!" he muttered, allowing some of his frustration to surface. He quickly regained his composure, viewing this as an excellent opportunity to stretch his legs beyond the confines of the medical ward, and since the storm subsided a bit, the weather had been getting eerily tolerable. He exhaled, understanding that the fastest route to the command structure lay through the open courtyard. With that in mind, he decided to grab his coat.

A sly smirk played on Gregory's lips as he left the staff room,

strolling past Lew. "I've got a message to hand-deliver to Fairhart. The emergency line is all messed up at the moment. I might swing by the stockroom to grab some reading material to pass the time. You look like you could use some entertainment."

Lew grinned. "Who me? This place is a thrill a minute, but ain't it kind of cold out there?"

"I'm sure the exterior courtyard heaters have kicked in by now," Gregory said as he rounded the corner of the hallway. "Oh, by the way, Richard Haymond, that's the kid's name. He might need some company when I'm not around. I'd appreciate it if you could look after him?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued on.

Observing that the weather had significantly improved, and the only potential obstacle was the thickening fog thanks to the exterior heaters mixing with the cold air, he felt relatively at ease. If it grew too cold, he could always take refuge in one of the adjacent buildings; they were all interconnected through various corridors, and he was confident he could find his way back in no time.

The hum of the wind intensified as he stepped outside, shutting the door behind him felt like sealing off a safety barrier against the never-ending abyss. While the twilight scenery was breathtaking, few medical staff had the opportunity to venture outdoors. After a brief pause to catch his breath, he decided to press on and make the most of his stroll.

The fog seemed damper than it was, as he stepped away from the building he was enveloped by it, he could see the lights from the third floor of the command structure, right where Fairhart's quarters would be. He followed that dim light, that pierced the

misty veil, but as he did so something appeared before him. The visage of a man, a guard standing there, glaring right at him.

“Guardsmen!” he called. “I’m a doctor, from the medical ward. I got a message for Fairhart.”

The guardsmen took small steps forward as he spoke.

“You okay? Kind of silent huh? Don’t blame you its different out here.” From the right of Gregory the sound of boots smooching mud beneath them caught his attention, his head cocked and he saw another guardsmen, this one in a crouched position, as if he had been there the whole time.

“What’s going on here?” Gregory muttered

Pain shot up Gregory's spine like an icy arrow as an unseen force struck him from behind. His chest heaved and his throat clenched, struggling to contain a scream that threatened to escape his lungs. An overpowering stench of decay assaulted his nostrils as two figures slowly walked toward him, their detail becoming clearer with each step. The shredded uniforms of the guardsmen revealed mutilated flesh where pieces of their faces had been gnawed away.

These were not men, they were the undead. In a flash of violence, the beasts pounced on him, ripping into his tender flesh and ravaging him with savage ferocity. His eyes gazed upward through the fog, and with what strength he had, Gregory reached in futility for the glowing lights of the command structure.

Outpost 13, Command Center:

Less than 300 feet away sat Fairhart, hurrying to wait for word of Richard Haymond. To fill the time, the commander persistently attended to mundane clerical tasks, none of which piqued his interest. As he exhausted his list of chores. He couldn't escape his responsibilities; as long as he occupied that chair, he remained on duty.

Shifting away from his tasks and returning to the monitors, he observed that the long range drones had covered a great distance, a testament to the newfound good weather. Their feeds were transmitting static riddled images, but they were clear enough. He shifted his gaze to the tracking monitor, displaying a green dot for every drone that was being tracked. Each drone was roughly a mile apart from one another. Fairhart imagined their large floodlights illuminating the ground soaring through the air like mechanical birds, a thought that brought a small smile to Fairhart's face.

He couldn't help but notice that each feed looked relatively the same. Despite their significant distance from one another, it was as if each one was broadcasting the exact same ground. A curious thought nagged at his mind. He switched over to the scouting drones surveying the surrounding area, eager to see if they, too, were capturing similar terrain. However, as he switched between each nearby scouting drone, he was met with an ironic yet terrifying discovery; they all broadcast identical footage of a breach in the gate guardhouse from an exterior.

Fairhart leaned back in his chair, the drones should have alerted

him to such a discovery, and they didn't. His concern deepened as he turned to another monitor, which displayed a summary of information about the base. To his shock and terror, all emergency broadcast relays were down. No emergency messages could go through, and the only way to terminate that signal would be from the comms center itself. In real-time, he watched the status of all wireless signals transition from "STABLE" to "DISCONNECTED" in a matter of seconds.

"They're here," he muttered.

Without delay, the commander whirled around and slammed his hand onto an analogue broadcast switch, connecting every room in the facility to the same hardwired feed. Small, dormant speakers throughout the base burst to life, each amplifying Fairhart's voice, forcefully grabbing the facility's attention. "Listen up, this is not a drill, this is an official emergency. We have a breach within the perimeter, our wireless and emergency frequencies have been terminated. An unknown number of possible undead have breached our walls."

Numerous staff and officers stood motionless as the message streamed in, absorbing every ominous directive issued by their commanding officer. Inside the barracks, the soldiers wasted no time. The transmission persisted as they marched through the corridors and into the armory, swiftly preparing for battle.

"This is a breach protocol. All non-military personnel, seek shelter and arm yourselves. Report any intruders if encountered, engage only if necessary. All military personnel, report to your commanding officers and prepare for potential combat."

Ready-Barracks:

Peterson handed Private Cole his helmet. “Don’t forget how to put it on rookie,” he joked.

Cole nodded in retort, not knowing how to feel about the situation. He strapped his helmet on as he and Peterson helped secure each other’s thermal battle armor.

“Don’t worry boys I’ll keep you alive out there,” Gallows replied. Her eyes shifted to Julian who was helping Tommie get his hefty backpack of gadgets on. She gave him a smile, “Every one of you...”

“Thats rather kind of you Gallows, I will be sure to fill out a voluntary job performance review with high regards after the battle,” Tommie said.

“Why do I get the feeling you ain’t joking?” Julian asked.

Hector entered the armory, “Nice to see you guys are almost done gearing up. Sarge is ready to go so let’s report!”

Each squad member checked their left wrist, where a small touch screen computer, used for communications asked if the operator was ready. Kane, who awaited his men within the barracks saw the vitals of each member come to life on his touch screen.

[ONLINE] A. Hector

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

[ONLINE] W. Gallows

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

[ONLINE] K. Peterson

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

[ONLINE] Q. Cole

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

[ONLINE] J. Julian

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

[ONLINE] B. Tommie

Status: Active

Vital Signs: Stable

A moment later the squad rushed in a single file formation into the barracks, while most other squads were still regrouping. Kane gave them a smirk, “Not bad, and with a rookie no less. Hate to say it but this is the real deal, so get your rifles and stay focused, we’ve got to secure this location before we can help anyone else.”

Kane peered the business end of his rifle down the long corridors of the facility. It was built strategically to keep the comms center and the command center within fairly short distance of the Ready-Barracks for a situation just like this. One would have to pass the barracks to get to the comms center. If it was tampered with they would have ran right past this door. Kane’s eyes shifted downward, the bright lights sent a glimmer off a fine cord tightly pressed across the open doorway.

Kane pointed down. “Stop, we got a trap...”

Kane crouched beside the ominous device, a sense of urgency gnawing at him as he assessed the trap's intricate components. His gloved hands moved with a deftness born of experience, fingers delicately tracing the wires and mechanisms. As Kane expertly disarmed the explosive, Private Cole stood holding the door.

“You see private,” Kane informed. “Not all zombies are dumb walkers, though it takes a really powerful force to raise the dead with any semblance of knowledge. What we are dealing with is a class 3 undead horde to say the least.” Stepping away from the now disarmed bomb, he ordered his men, "Get on the analog communication network and inform Fairhart that we're facing an unknown number of highly intelligent undead. We've also detected an explosive device designed to take us out. Relay this information immediately and rendezvous with me right away. Our priority is to

sweep the halls of the facility, and all five entrances to the barracks for intruders and potential traps. We can't afford any casualties, including those in the surrounding area, and for God sakes someone go find the LT."

Once all entrances were cleared a variety of experienced sergeants scattered across the facility, securing vital positions, Kane himself was on his way to the comms, then to the medical ward. Hindered by the threat of explosive traps, they moved steadily through the facility, clearing each room along the way to the communication station.

Kane's squad stood before the wrecked reinforced door, leading into comms. Private Cole gave his fellow guardsmen a glance of fear. Tommie met his glaze and shot him a quick smile before returning his attention to the door.

Kane stepped forward, slowly creaking the door open with his weapon. They knew whatever was on the other side was going to be bad, but they didn't expect this. The creaked door unveiled the unbridled gore of the once pristine comms center. The innards of men were scattered about like a bed of leaves, piles of bones and gore were brushed together at the side as pools of fresh enough blood found they're way to every corner of the comms station.

Kane was the first to enter, he crouched down and slowly peered his head in the cramped confines laid with butchery. The sound of something scouring about accented the terrible scents of bile that permeated the air. Laying his rifle atop a turned over desk, Kane fixed his sights on a grotesque visage. The only remaining crew the now undead communications officer, with his torn off head facing his command monitors, taking in everything he saw.

A single round ripped through the air tearing the dilapidated head into pieces. Kane lowered his rifle, “That thing was left here to report any and all communications.”

“Report?” Cole asked.

“Yes, dummy. All zombies work on a hive mind man, he’s telling the horde,” Hector replied. “You need to read up on your daily intel from time to time.”

“Not now!” Kane barked, “look at this place. Who knows what intel they got, and our comms are compromised to say the least. Tommie, get a message to Fairhart, inform him what happened here. Everyone else, we’re going to medical before they get there.”

“Copy!” Tommie said, in moments he pulled out a trusty mobile monitor and patched into their communications network.

“You think the undead are on their way to medical as well?” Gallows asked.

“That would be my second stop,” Kane replied.

Medical Ward:

With the delayed response, the sparsely staffed medical ward had already initiated their defensive protocols. Every member of the medical staff had undergone basic training in light arms combat, a precaution that meant each of them carried a sidearm at all times.

Within the fortified facility, the medical personnel took up their positions with utmost precision. They crouched behind reinforced walls and portable medical equipment, forming a protective barrier around the patients' quarters. Each nurse and doctor

focused intently on their assigned area, their expressions a mix of determination and concern.

Lew sat by Richard's bedside. "How are you feeling?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that," he replied, his voice sounding healthy.

"From what I hear, they found you pretty banged up. It's Richard, right?"

"Among other things... Yeah, Richard, and you?"

"Lewis Soon, everyone just calls me Lew though... I heard about the crew."

"They weren't a crew; they were survivors. I need to speak to your commander."

Lew looked towards the locked door. "The Doc went out there to talk to him, I assume about something you said. He hasn't come back yet, probably stuck somewhere in the base."

"Or worse. We need to talk to the commander immediately."

"You said 'we' this time?"

"I need help. Please, what's coming... what's already here will kill us all. I need to speak with him."

"That's probably where the Doc went. Why don't you tell me about yourself? Where are you from?"

Richard remained quiet for a moment, then muttered, "...E City."

"E City? That's where they make all the movies and stuff, right?"

"Yeah, and find new talent in just about every entertainment industry you can think of."

"The City of Magic," Lew said, remembering the old phrase from a magazine he read.

"That's what they called it when I was a kid."

"Why are you all the way out here?"

"Home stuff..."

Lew nodded, not knowing what to say.

"Funny, I thought being assigned to a science outpost was supposed to be safe. The staffer told me, a science outpost does science. What do you expect to fight out there?"

Lew lifted his brow. "Really? They told me a vehicle outpost works on vehicles."

The two of them let out a shared chuckle. "I always thought they had some kind of script to work on... How about you, where are you from?" Richard inquired.

"Oldton."

"And you think I'm from a crazy place. You don't even have to ask me why you left there... Are the legends true, are there vampires in Oldton?" Richard seemed to relax a bit more and show genuine interest.

Lew shrugged. "No idea. I know that I was a kid when those kinds of rumors started spreading. I was living in a crap apartment in Tyrak when I was supposed to be going to school, when I decided enough was enough and it was time to move home, the new government officials at Oldton wouldn't permit my travel."

"So, you've never been home or something?"

"Yeah, basically. I ended up joining the Whitlonian Armed Forces two months later when I couldn't stand my retail job. Five years later, here I am."

Richard looked him over. "You spent five years to become a ward hand in medical?"

Lew's face went blank as the realization that he was no longer an officer flooded upon him. "Oh..." He looked down at his standard blue and white medical scrubs and let out a sigh.

"Guess I'm not the only one having a bad day, huh?"

Lew smirked. "It's a long story."

The two locked eyes and shared a trusting gaze. Richard nodded and said, "When I left home, the last thing I did was-"

A chaotic and fearful cacophony erupted outside their quarters. The piercing cries of terror clashed with the dreadful rumbles of small arms fire as hurried footsteps passed by their door. The two men locked eyes but for a moment, Lew checked his sidearm and rapidly approached the door, leaning up against the wall, he slowly cracked the door open to a sliver and peaked the barrel of his handgun out just enough to witness the unfolding chaos. The many doctors and mobile enough patients rushed for the exit doors as few stood their ground against what appeared to be three zombies. They were not the casual stumbling zombies that are most common but strong mobile undead who tore through their prey like paper.

He wondered why the numerous armed personnel had abandoned their posts so readily. It had been ingrained in him throughout his journey to becoming an officer that it was their duty to hold their ground. Yet, here he stood among civilian officials who fled for

their lives, carrying the very weapons necessary to secure the area.

While he couldn't entirely blame them, the unfolding sight was a massacre of those who either couldn't or refused to flee. Some aimed for the head, following their training. However, when the bullets ricocheted off the creatures' bulletproof helmets, most stood there in shock and terror. All they needed to do was aim between the eyes.

Lew witnessed a woman being lifted by the creature as if she were a mere plaything, pinning her to the wall by her throat with one hand. It emitted a horrifying chuckle, clearly relishing the torment it was causing. "You let me die," the creature growled, its words accompanied by a toxic screech. "Now show our master your secrets."

Lew's mind raced as his heart pounded away, the thoughts of his officers training flooded forward as he grasped upon a mental visage to rely upon. He exhaled while gripping his sidearm, even in combat there was a protocol for this. Lew stepped out of his hiding place, attempting to intervene, but he was too late. The creature sank its teeth into the woman's neck, causing a gush of crimson to escape her.

"Hey!" Lew exclaimed. The creature turned its head to face this unexpected intruder, only to find itself inches away from his sidearm. Lew squeezed the trigger, and he watched as the creature's skull shattered, releasing a spray of decaying flesh and writhing insects throughout the once pristine medical ward.

The woman's body contorted in anguish as the venom coursed through her veins. Her eyes turned a sinister shade of black, and she began to mutter cryptic phrases, "Master, help me, master,

humans, need, everything."

Lew stood over her, his eyes filled with sorrow, but chaos continued to reign within the facility. He aimed his shaking hands, and pulled the trigger once more, mercifully ending her suffering. The doors to the ward burst open, and Lew instinctively stood frozen, his hands trembling with fear as shock finally overtook him. A surge of relief washed over him when Kane Brikter charged in with a squad of soldiers. Their footsteps echoed through the dimly lit corridor, and the rumbling of gunshots filled the air as they swiftly engaged the attacking undead, silencing the threat with precision.

"Lew, are you okay?" Kane inquired as he surveyed the area. "Did you take care of these things?" His voice held a mix of concern and admiration, "And what about him?" Kane continued, pointing to Richard, who was leaning up against the wall.

"Richard?!?" Lew said, quickly approaching the man. "What are you doing?"

"We need to go. We need to see the commander, get the transports running and leave. Please."

Lew held Richard upright as best he could, gripping his gun with his one free arm.

Kane assessed the situation. "It's not a bad idea at the moment. We have a direct route to the barracks and the command center. My squad will handle things here, neither of you are leaving my sight, let's move." He turned to his men, "Peterson, Cole you're coming with us, everyone else hold this position until further notice. Protect those who can't move."

Hector loaded in a fresh mag, "You got it Sarge, don't die."

The soldiers meticulously checked each room they passed. Some appeared undisturbed, as if they had been abandoned long ago, while others bore the brutal scars of destruction. The once pristine walls in many parts of the ward were marred by dark stains of blood and bullets. The medical personnel couldn't contain their shock, the gruesome aftermath of what was once their friends lay before them in gore ridden waste.

Kane hurried them through the facility's corridors before they emerged into an expansive courtyard. As they stepped into the open air, the sensation of cold mist brushing against their skin was an unexpected relief. Despite the biting chill, the courtyard provided a momentary sanctuary, offering respite from the horrific confinement of the facility's interior.

The crimson glow from a multitude of flares marking their path, beckoned them toward the imposing command structure. "We laid these out upon arrival, come on," Kane urged them forward.

Each breath hung in the frigid air like a visible cloud. It was as if the fog itself held secrets, whispering in hushed tones. A dreadful aura of something dark peering through the veil of mist captivated them. To Kane's displeasure they passed the body of Doctor Greogry, eaten alive and torn to bits. He knew what lay here, but there was no time to waste, Kane knew this was not even the first real assault wave. Nonetheless, the crowd of survivors were stunned at the sight of their colleague.

Kane looked over the scared group, along with one frightened private and spoke, "I understand the curiosity burning inside each of you. We'll avenge our friends, but first, we need to get inside. I'll explain everything once we're there." Kane's glance shifted to his

fellow guardsmen, giving them a glance of trust and respect, one that they returned with unflinching bravery.

The group carried on at a sluggish pace, as the trauma of what they had witnessed left them wounded. They could not get out of that courtyard fast enough. Each scientist and staff member, no matter how wounded rushed through the door of the command center once the opportunity was available.

Expecting some respite similar to their first change of scenery, the door entering the command structure was torn asunder, with bits of necrotic flesh hanging from the jagged remains of metal. Lifeless soldiers lay strewn across the floor, their bodies bearing the brutal marks of combat with grotesque undead creatures, and the their many victims, each with a knife wound in the head to keep them dead. The walls of the metallic structure were stained black by the residue of gunfire, and this was only the entrance.

Undoubtedly, their minds would bear permanent scars. These brilliant intellectuals had confronted the unfiltered cruelty of the abyss, and its magnificence had altered them. The expressions in their eyes ranged from terror to ceaseless whimpering in fear and dread, with only a handful managing to retain shreds of sanity.

Upon reaching the third floor, vigilant guards awaited them, their watchful eyes never wavering. Past this threshold, the interior seemed strangely untouched, almost as if it belonged to a different world. The sudden shift from chaos to order left some of the few remaining sane individuals visibly shaken. They muttered to themselves, struggling to process the horrors they had witnessed.

Kane and his men guided them to the rooftop where two diverging paths lay ahead. He motioned for the staff members to proceed

towards a cluster of evacuation air transports. Lew and Richard, however, found themselves halted by Kane's hand.

"Not you, Richard, was it? Lew, you can go but the commander needs to talk to this guy," Kane said firmly.

Lew stepped back, glancing at the distressed man, their eyes locking. For a moment he glanced at the distant transports, wishing he were among their passengers. "I'm not leaving him," he forced himself to say.

Kane didn't argue, "Fine, lets go..."

The trio navigated the untouched corridors of the third floor until they encountered a group of guardsmen protecting the entrance to the command center. Despite the ongoing disaster, the men appeared to be in good spirits. Partially due to the segregation of soldiers and staff, there were less familiar faces among the dead these men had to bear witness. Inside the command center, Fairhart awaited their arrival.

"Welcome, men. The situation within the base is under control, but we're not out of the woods yet," Fairhart said, paying no heed to any past tensions among those present. "Richard, I'm sorry you had to see any of this. You should be on your way out shortly. There's much you can help us with, but that can wait." He shifted his attention to Kane, completely ignoring Lew. "Brikter...Your lieutenant was found dead in his quarters, well undead. He had to be put down upon arrival." He grit his teeth as he summoned the strength to hold back the vomit before he continued. "I've decided to promote you to the temporary position of lieutenant until further notice. The men trust you, but I will need you to work with me out there, Kane. Understand?"

"I figured it was that bad," Kane replied, showing no concern for rank. "This entire assault reeks of a Class 3 Undead."

Lew lifted his head, "As a women began to turn into one of those things right in front of me, she said something about, a master?"

"If it's a Class 3, it's possible the undead have a host, some kind of hive mind," Kane suggested.

"That limits it down to a handful of known Class 3's," Fairhart said.

"Sir!" A voice called from the entrance. "We've got all networks back online, but there's no signal to the outside."

Fairhart pondered for a moment. "That's probably because we're not the only outpost under assault right now. We lost Science Outpost 13, and it's not far-fetched to believe Communication Outpost 13 is in similar peril. Without that outpost all long range transmissions will be down. Try contacting anyone, see if we can establish long range communication to prove that theory wrong."

"Yes, sir!" the soldier said before stomping off.

"Communications Outpost 13. That happens to be where the transports are headed." Fairhart turned to one of his men guarding the door. "Send a message to the transporters, instruct them to divert to Military Outpost 12."

"That's quite a distance, sir. It'll take them a while to get back here," Kane said.

"That's why we need to prepare. If what you say is true, there may be a host controlling these creatures. Do we know the name of the beast? I'd like to study its profile."

“Some of the men called it a, Vetala,” Richards lips whispered. “That’s what the doctor in the transport said it was too. A shape shifting, mind playing, necrotic wander of the undead.”

“There's no fancy way to kill a zombie, lieutenant. Find it and put a bullet in it.”

Kane saluted his commanding officer, seeing this as an opportunity to keep the young Private Cole out of harm’s way, as this was quite the unprecedented situation. He left Cole and Peterson on guard duty, to protect the Commander in case of any unforeseen intruders, before regrouping with the rest of the squad.

Fairhart turned towards Lew. “I have no idea why you are here. You should have been on a transport by now.”

“I can’t leave him,” he replied in a low whisper.

“How quaint. Very well...” Turning once more towards Richard, Fairhart offered him a seat at the opposite side of his monitor riddled desk. “Rest while you can. What we know of the undead armies, a Vetala infiltration is a preliminary attack, making way for the primary assault force, made up of who knows what.”

“That’s what happened to us. They came in through the walls and rampaged through the facility leaving no one alive; my friends...” Richard hesitated, his stare turning blank.

“And how exactly did it do that?” Fairhart leaned over from his side of the desk.

He raised his gaze from the depths of fear and met the commanding officer's eyes. "They breached the vehicle bay, the communication center, and the command center. We were blindsided. I was on duty at the transports, and I saw a horde

of scientists sprinting toward me!" He clenched the edge of his seat, leaning forward, his eyes refusing to blink. "I halted them, securing the interior blockade from inside the center. I was just a lowly guard, that's all..." His eyes welled with tears as his once steady voice started to falter. "The creatures, they ripped through the crowd, and I froze. I froze while their desperate cries for help turned into agonizing screams of rage and suffering. I just stood there, unable to move. I witnessed them all die... That's where the response team found me, still frozen behind the barricades, half an hour later."

The guards all covered their ears as an incoming message blared through their radio headsets. They quickly moved out while the sound of an alarm began to ring throughout the facility. Short of Peterson and Cole who had direct orders to remain put.

"Sorry for the buzzing; it's standard protocol during defense preparations. That's where they're headed," Fairhart explained, he carefully scanned his monitors, searching for the appropriate controls to silence the interior alarm. "This will be a different fight my friend. I promise you. Now, who was in command when they found you, what happened next? Please, spare no details."

He sank in his seat as his eyes locked on the window afar from the room. The surrounding fog was slowly pulling back, his voice turning into a whisper as he spoke. "That happened... It's too late. I'm sorry."

Fairhart gazed out of the window, as the fog dissipated, it revealed a nightmarish sight. A legion of skinless figures, nothing more than skeletons draped in ancient, shattered armor, standing shoulder to shoulder. They brandished jagged weapons, and this

immense horde stretched across the surrounding plains. Revealed in the open, they came to life their weapons thrust high. Voices exploded into a chaotic symphony of curses and sinister laughter, overpowering the blaring alarm.

Lew lost all composure, screaming aloud as he smashed into the wall behind him, attempting a futile retreat, yet still he could not look away. His screams sent a shiver through Richard who huddled in his seat with his head between his legs. "Make it go away, please make it go away!"

Fairhart grappled with his fraying composure, his trembling hands poised above the control panel. He hesitated, realizing their cunning ploy; baiting him into squandering their defenses on a mere Class 1 Skullie horde. Deadly, yes, but vulnerable to small arms.

Reserving his more explosive options, he readied a torrent of automated cannons and flamethrowers. Then, activating the communications system, he cleared his voice and summoned all courage within him. "We're under attack by a Skullie horde from all directions. Man your defensive posts and await my orders."

Medical Ward:

Kane had just arrived to assemble his team for a skull hunt. He didn't know where to start or the full profile of a Vetala. Orders were orders, but they were about to be disrupted. When the alarm blared and Fairhart's voice echoed through the intercom, Kane was taken aback. He knew there would eventually be an attack, but they

were far from prepared. He glared at his men as they all took in the given commands, with little time to explain what had happened. Kane pointed to the new lieutenant insignia on his shoulders.

Hector gave him a smile, one that soon faded as a horrifying sound surrounded them. The piercing alarm, mingled with the bellowing roars of the approaching Skullies. Fairhart's voice boomed resolutely over the blaring microphone. "Ignore their taunts; it's all mind games. They're vulnerable to small arms and fire! Our walls are impervious to their weak melee weapons!"

Kane cracked a confident smile as he looked to his men. "Looks like we are on defense. Get to your designated positions! Hector, you're promoted to Sergeant."

Hector stood up straight with a bright yet fearful smile written across his face. "Thank you, sir!" he said with a salute.

"Lead this squad to victory, Hector. I've got a much larger command to see through." Kane turned his attention to the rest of his squad. "I will be with you on the battlefield, men. We are in this together."

"Yes, sir!" they replied as one. He smiled at his men, knowing they would make him proud out there. "Go get them."

Hector, Gallows, Julian, and Tommie all passed their new lieutenant with their heads held high and rifles at the ready.

Kane surveyed the remaining injured patients and the fearful yet armed staff. "You know how to use that weapon?" he asked the least shaky doctor in the ward.

A thin man of decent height pointed his finger at himself. "Me? Yeah, I shoot for fun."

“You’re the civilian who uses up all the physical targets, aren't ya?”

The doctor replied with a guilty chuckle.

“Well, that's a good thing, Doc, because you’re in charge now.”

“What?”

“You hear me, you’re in charge. I've got to go. You each have guns, and if I can’t help my men defend the walls, you won’t have enough bullets to save your lives. I’m going now...” Half of the ward erupted in protest as Kane hurried out of the room. He double-checked his rifle and let out a sigh. It had been a long time since he’d been in a real battle, and he knew what the price would be. Kane made his way to the officers' tent, where a group of officer's aides, whose names he couldn't recall, awaited his orders.

“Sir?!” a young, striking guardsman said.

It was clear she hadn't been chosen for her combat skills. “What's the situation on the field, soldier?”

She cleared her throat and did her best to conceal the fear in her voice. “We’re surrounded on all sides, sir. All officers have reported to their stations, and we are awaiting further commands.”

“Good.” He waved at her before picking up an unclaimed sniper rifle and began his march towards a guard tower nestled in the corner of the outpost.

“Wait, sir, what are you doing?”

“I'll be commanding from the field.” He glanced down at the cluttered tent of gadgets and spotted the lieutenant's touchscreen device. “That’s probably mine now. You can contact me through

this for all the essential information. Trust me, it's soothing for the soul."

The young military aide was at a loss for words, standing there, watching the new officer trot off to the front. "Wait, does that mean I'm in charge? No, I relay information... That means I tell him what's happening, right!" She hastily donned a headset. "Check, check, lieutenant, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear!" Kane's voice echoed back; he spent the next few minutes ascending the tower. From the top, he had a clear view of the command center. He could make out the faint figures of the men inside through his scope. On the exterior of the wall, all he saw was an endless horde of undead trampling over each other, bellowing dreadful obscenities that merged into a vast, animalistic chorus of terror. Kane surveyed the open ground, separating the undead from the mighty walls that protected them. He gazed down at the defenders, young and old, thrusting their rifles through the portholes or resting them atop the metal of the wall's defenses, ready for the battle ahead. "Woman, what did you say your name was?"

"Corporal Jane Yugo..."

"Right, Yugo, I need you to look at all the dots on the screen and tell me how far it says the enemies line is?"

"300 yards, sir."

"Thank you," he muttered as he scoped out the front. A surge of fear coursed down his spine as the enemy's war cries sounded alarmingly close, even though they were still some distance away. The sheer number of adversaries must be beyond imagination.

“Wait, sir, they’re closing in, I think they began they’re charge!”

"Hold steady; await my order!" Fairhart's words echoed through the facility as the horde rushed their defenses from all sides.

Kane took the display he commandeered from his command tent and set it up within the tower. On his monitor an ominous blotch consumed the digital depiction of their outpost, and as the Skullies closed in on the auto cannons' effective range, he heard Fairhart call over the mic. "Hold firm, do not open fire until I give the word!" They must have been looking at the same feed.

Kane double checked his sniper rifle before taking aim. He primarily used his scope to observe the battlefield. This was only the first wave, and their enemies were predominantly melee fighters. There was little need to waste valuable ammunition on them. Kane surveyed the horizon, searching for any signs of leadership. Despite the ongoing battle, the Vetala was still at large, and his mission remained to eliminate it.

The hordes of bone creatures, clad in colorful armor and brandishing raised blades, appeared almost comical at first glance. However, their menacing, synchronized battle cries, amplified by their sheer numbers, erased any sense of amusement as they surged towards the defenses like a crashing wave. Kane did his best to keep his attention on the search.

Gunfire erupted, intensifying the chaos on the battlefield as the command to defend fiercely reverberated. Despite scouring the scene, the only tangible observation was the eerie fog that had not fully lifted, but concealed whatever might be lurking beyond their line of sight, shrouding potential threats from view. He lowered the

scope as his mind set upon aiding in the battle, hunting down that bastard would have to wait until later. Kane looked at the display, taking in all the information he could, as the claws of the enemy scraped upon the very wall his tower was situated within.

Inside the Command Center:

“East defense, release a flame barrage and engage anti-climber counter measures,” Fairhart's unwavering gaze remained locked on a sensor display.

The Commander's firm words had a calming effect on Lew. Fairhart was a difficult leader, but it was clear he was doing his best. Lew managed to compose himself, sitting in a collective manner. Meanwhile, Richard looked on, unable to tear his eyes away from the relentless barrage of gunfire.

Cole and Peterson exchanged concerned glances. They were trained for combat, but for the moment, they were spectators in an unfolding battle. Somewhere out there, their friends were fighting for every life inside these walls. Richard stood up as the guards seemed preoccupied with the ongoing battle and rushed towards Lew, sitting down beside him.

“Everything okay?” Lew asked as he did his best to compose himself.

“It's safer closer to the ground.”

“Sure. I get it... I'm sorry,” Lew muttered.

Richard nodded. “I was an orphan,” he said in a low whisper.

Lew leaned his head in, "What?"

"An orphan." Richard looked around the room, where all eyes were fixed on the battle. "I left because I never had a home."

Lew didn't have the words.

"When I was a kid in E City, my foster mom got me working backstage," Richard confessed. "It's a place where people exploit kids. They call it work, but you get paid almost nothing and never get to leave the dorms until you're 16. Then they dump you on the side of the street with whatever change you made. The first thing I saw on my own was a sign to join the Armed Whitlonian Forces. An expedition of a lifetime, a home for those willing to serve. This is where my new home brought me..." Richard's attention was drawn away as the blast from a large explosion in the distance punctuated the battle unfolding nearby.

Lew sat up, trying to divert his attention from the chaos beyond the command center. Still lacking words, he assured the wounded man, "I won't let anything happen to you."

Richard looked at him, offering a brave smile. "The Doctor was a nice man, Gregory?"

"Yeah, Kyle Gregory. He was my friend. He would have been yours too."

"He was getting there, a little bit."

Lew smiled, "He used to tell me I spent more time in the ward than he did, calling me his number one patient."

The two men shared a laugh, enough to capture Cole's attention. Lew and Cole exchanged glances, but the young soldier looked away first. Lew couldn't help but notice how fidgety Cole was.

He gazed out the window where two guardsmen stared into the distance, where chaos reigned beyond the walls. A dark thought crept into the back of his mind. "How are we going to survive this?"

A few feet away from the gawking guardsmen and broken soldiers stood Fairhart before his makeshift desk turned command post. He felt like he was the only one doing anything to help win the battle. As he glanced around, his eyes rested on Richard, who sat beside Lew with his head down. A revelation from their past conversation flashed through his head. The boy had stopped speaking once the battle commenced, and Fairhart became curious about what he might know regarding the enemy's current tactics. Along with his curiosity, a pang of idiotic guilt struck him as the idea hadn't occurred to him sooner. "Richard," Fairhart called, "mind coming back over here?" He pointed to his desk. "I have a few more questions."

Richard looked at Lew who gave him an approving nod. He turned his head to Fairhart who stood near frozen, with a large fake smile plastered across his face. Richard stood up slowly and carried himself to the open seat before Fairhart's desk.

Ballistic turrets shredded the loathsome skull creatures like flimsy paper, their bodies vanishing beneath the ceaseless barrage. Yet, the horde continued to surge forward like water eroding rock. The Skullies, devoid of self-preservation instincts, paid little heed to their own obliteration while charging headlong into the volley of turret fire.

As Fairhart was going to begin his brief interrogation a message flashed across his desk. "We've got some good news," Fairhart

announced. "The first of the transports has completed unloading staff at MO-12. They're en route back with air support. This should buy us some time to evacuate the facilities. The transports will be here, in two hours. They had to get within transmitting range for us to pick them up. We will make sure you are the first one on there, Richard."

Both Cole and Peterson kept their focus on the battlefield as Fairhart played his game. Cole's eyes scanned the interior of the walls for any signs of their squad. Peterson looked out at the hordes; a part of him longed to be out there with the men. Guilt gnawed at him for being up here in the safety of the command center. Peterson glanced back at Fairhart, locking eyes with the man for a moment. Sharing a glare that said, "Look away soldier, I got work to do."

Fairhart's gaze shifted towards the men in the corner, Richard lifted his head, a slight look of hope treading across his face. "Please..."

Peterson returned to looking out the large window, watching the chaos, as a seamlessly endless army of undead marched out of the wall of fog that built up around them. That's when something caught his attention, Peterson could not help but notice a large object exiting the fog on the horizon. "See that?" he whispered to Cole. Not waiting for an answer he took a step closer to the glass.

Fairhart smiled, locking eyes with the boy, doing his best to show false sympathy to Richard. His mind was far too distracted to care about the plights of any single individual at the moment. "I was hoping you could aid us further, what do you remember occurring before you left the facility, what happened during the battle?"

Fairhart reclined as he awaited his answer, "Time is imperat-."

“Oh no!” Peterson yelled, he quickly turned and pushed Private Cole out of the way.

Shards of glass flew through the air as a large, strange, white object pierced the window, smashing into the command desk, as another smashed directly into Peterson, goring the man. Fairhart and Richard were sent flying as the object shattered. Lew fell backward, gazing at the gaping hole in the window, Cole stood frozen as the giant blur of white shattered his friend. In the distance, they could see more of these strange white shapes being propelled from behind enemy lines and into the interior.

These strange objects were smashing against the ground and metal, joining the cacophony that penetrated the soundproof room. Near his foot, he noticed a piece of debris, a shard of bone. It became apparent that the entire object that had flown into the interior was made of pure bone, but why?

Cole and Lew shared a glance before Lew’s eyes returned to the bones. Private Cole followed his gaze. when his eyes fell upon the bone, he remembered the biology of the Skullies. They were easy to defeat but difficult to keep down because of their mysterious and dark nature, which enabled them to reassemble using nearby Skully bones. He had never quite comprehended how this was possible, but as he shook off his dazed confusion, the men watched it happening right before their eyes.

With an eerie, unseen power, various human bone fragments were inexorably drawn together, forming nightmarish abominations. These Skullies, grotesque and horrifying, defied any semblance of human anatomy, their forms twisted into nightmarish abominations that sent a strike of terror through all who beheld them. Cole

slowly lifted his rifle as it violently shook within his hands.

“Peterson...” he muttered. The body of his friend laid broken and bloody, as a single abomination was covered with the innards of his friend.

From a distance, Lew observed Richard struggling to his feet, his body covered in splinters and glass shards. A fierce expression of rage contorted Richard’s face. Meanwhile, Fairhart fought to free himself, pinned against a wall by large debris that had once been his desk. These monstrous creations arose around them, a total of four coming to life. With grotesque screams, their senses rapidly adapted to their new existence.

One of the grotesque creatures spewed curses as it ripped off one of its many arms to use as a weapon. "Time to die, human scum!" it snarled, charging toward Lew. Helplessly, the medical hand raised his sidearm, fully aware that it might not be enough. As the creature was about to complete its charge and attack, a single shot rang out from afar. The round tore through the air, reducing the Skullie monstrosity to shattered fragments. The other three creatures roared, seemingly sharing in their fallen kin's agony.

The sight of his lieutenant infused him with strength; Cole wasn't alone. He prepared his rifle and steadied his trembling hands as best he could, targeting the nearest abomination and squeezing the trigger. As Cole's rifle illuminated the room, Richard hastily limped out, disregarding everyone and retracing their path back to the roof.

The thunderous roar of gunfire snapped Fairhart from his daze. Pinned beneath his own desk, the commander scanned the room just in time to witness Cole's magazine running dry. The

abomination he'd been shooting at had lost one of its four arms and two of its three legs, now writhing on the floor in all directions, its intended victims just out of reach. The creature pulled itself with one arm closer to Cole as the other lashed out in all directions, making contact with one of the two standing abominations, causing that abomination to hiss at its wounded kin. As the dumb creatures took their time to respond, Cole loaded a new magazine, as he took aim a shot rang out from the side of him.

The bullet escaped Fairharts sidearm, grabbing their attention away from the private. "Go! Get out of here," he yelled. "That's an order, soldier!"

Fairhart reloaded his pistol and continued his commands, relentlessly unloading every round he could. Yet another loud report joined the chaos as Kane's sniping found another mark; a second Skullie broke into pieces, many of which flew and lodged themselves within the fallen officer. His shooting ceased, as a piece of bone found itself lodged within him, Fairhart looked over at Cole, his eyes begging for him to finally move.

Summoning the last of his strength and aided by the momentary distraction caused by the destruction of another Skullie, he reached for a shattered tablet. With trembling hands and a blood-stained touch, he tapped its screen, the device responding with more force than usual. Fairhart managed a painful smile as he activated all defensive measures and unleashed everything the base had. He sat back with his eyes closed as a bit of relief lifted from his shoulders. It was up to them now...

Cole and Lew escaped the nightmare, and raced through the corridors of the upper levels. Lew tugged on Cole's uniform,

slowing the man down. “Where are we going private?” Cole turned and looked at him through desperate eyes. “I’ve failed. Petersons dead, the commanders dead, we don’t know the state of the base. We need to regroup with Kane, or Seargent Hector!” The roar of the Skullie abominations in the distance drove the two away, forcing them to speak as best they could through their tired teeth.

“I need to find Richard. The poor bastard just wanted to get out of here with everyone else... I just can’t leave him,” Lew said, half leaning his body against Cole.

“I know... I know...” Cole could barely process what this guy was saying, he was doing his best just to hold it together. “What’s your name again?”

Lew stopped and looked at the man. “Lew... Cole, right?”

“Yeah. Private Cole, Lew... Let’s keep going,” he said as he took deep breaths. His only intention was getting back to his squad. There was safety in soldiers.

The two were guided by the escalating sounds of gruesome warfare ahead. They traversed through the single corridor and kicked the creaky door open, merging onto the rooftop once more, only to be halted in their tracks by the unfolding chaos. Skullie abominations swarmed the courtyard, where a familiar officer engaged their number.

Vehicle Outpost 13, Courtyard:

"Lieutenant Kane, they're everywhere?!" the young assistant cried out before her screams for mercy echoed through the mic.

Kane leaped from the defensive tower, landing on top of an abomination, and shoved an explosive inside it. Kicking himself away, he watched as the blast shattered the creature. Kane sprinted toward the command tent just in time to witness blood seeping through the fabric, a gruesome sight that he couldn't afford to dwell on. To end their suffering, he hurled his final grenade into the tent, sparing only a moment of sympathy before refocusing his attention on the unfolding mayhem.

He thrust his gun barrel into the chest of another creature, squeezing the trigger. The deafening battle sounds overwhelmed his senses so much that the sharp crack of his sniper rifle was drowned out. Nevertheless, the abomination exploded into a thousand fragments.

Amidst the relentless onslaught of skeletal abominations within the base, Kane stood as a stalwart guardian. Many guardsmen from decimated squads rallied to him. Kane lined up the men in a quick, single file, two line formation, the front row knelt as the back row stood sending a storm of bullets tearing through the approaching skeletal monstrosities. The interior of the outpost became a battleground, with Kane as its final commander.

Outside the base, a mighty defense was in full swing. The heavy thud of artillery fire echoed through the air as explosive shells

crashed into the encroaching horde of skeletal creatures. Flames erupted, engulfing the abominations in fiery infernos, casting shadows on the bloodstained ground. The endless horde crashed upon the walls, as the buzz of drones flew over, dropping payloads of explosives upon the surrounding positions.

As communication from Commander Fairhart faded, not a single squad broke away from their defense. Hector and his squad were scattered about the defensive lines, Juian was sent to take up Kane's old sniping position alongside Tommie to act as spotter. Gallows was in the rear with a handful of other medics, trying to save injured guardsmen in the kitchen turned medical ward. Hector stood meters behind the line, barking orders to weary warriors to keep up the defense.

Within the base, Kane's every movement was a testament to his combat expertise. He pivoted and fired, each shot finding its mark in the bony remains of the approaching undead. Their skeletal forms shattered into a display of dismembered bones and splintered fragments. The undead within their walls were being eradicated. Flame units readied the interior battlefield, burning down the abominations to cinder.

As the battle shifted, men returned to their posts, fortifying their positions. Undead on the walls were met with force as the Whitlonian Armed Forces refused to yield. Drones took flight, dropping large industrial sized warheads, engulfing hundreds of Skullies in a searing fire, that pulverized them to ash. Then, a horrifying roar echoed through the facility and shook its fortified walls. Both undead and men came to a standstill as the heavy footsteps of a mighty weapon entered the battlefield.

Julian and Tommie gazed in awe from their defensive tower as a colossal, malevolent machine emerged from the dissipating fog. "This is what they were hiding," Julian said. "Their ultimate weapon, a freaking undead Bio-Mech..."

"That is a technological monstrosity, I never witnessed such a vile incarnate," Tommie muttered aloud. He turned and pulled a small monitor out of his backpack of gadgetry and booted into the facility's network, reviewing their current auto munitions available throughout the facility. An access only granted to him when Julian won them in a card game.

A behemoth, standing as tall as a building, advanced on two massive legs. It was a monstrous fusion of necrotic biology and resin-like alloy. Metallic pieces formed an exoskeleton that protected an interior of putrefying organs and unfamiliar intestines pulsating with unlife. The interior oozed black bile, coursing through its decaying veins and pumping its enlarged, rotting heart with disease-ridden fluids.

"Lieutenant Kane we got a gigantic Bio-Mech heading straight for us. We gotta give this thing everything we got!" Julian screamed over the mic before unloading sniper rounds into the machine, as futile as that may be.

Kane absorbed every word from the frightened guardsman. "Understood, we're redirecting all drones to focus on that monstrosity. Redirect all artillery fire on that thing. It either hits the ground, or we're all finished!"

In mere seconds, the swarm of drones hovering around the base, assaulting from all directions, shifted in unison like a swarm of bees and began their ascent into the sky. The buzzing of their

propellers ceased as they disappeared from sight. Then, they descended, releasing their entire payloads as one onto the beast's very head.

The colossal undead Bio-Mech, was seemingly impervious to the relentless drone assault, moved forward with horrifying determination, its massive form casting a long shadow over the beleaguered outpost. For a heart-stopping moment, it appeared as though the drones' firepower might not be enough to halt this nightmarish advance. Panic swept through the defenders as they watched the beast lumber ever closer, its resilience casting doubt on their desperate efforts.

Then, as the barrage continued, hairline fractures appeared in the Bio-Mech's resin-clad armor, and the necrotic flesh beneath began to seep through. The creature's limbs, once mighty and unstoppable, started to give way, sending showers of sparks and bile into the air. It let out a bone-chilling shriek of agony, its movements faltering as it struggled to maintain its forward momentum. Fear and hope intertwined as the defenders witnessed the first signs of the beast's defeat. Piece by piece, the Bio-Mech's colossal form began to disintegrate, before imploding and an entire front of Skullies along with it.

Facility Interior:

Lee focused on the one semblance of order he could cling to in this chaotic madness, finding Richard. “The landing zone, Richard would have gone to the landing zone.”

Cole nodded, "Right, the landing zone!" With everything unfolding around him, Cole's mind kept shifting between Kane and safety. The only form of safety here is that landing zone, and being the first on an air transport. "Let's go find Richard..." His steps felt heavy, the thought of Peterson kept flashing through his head. He knew the landing zone was in the opposite direction of Kane. His steps slowed, "I can take you to the tower, once we are there I've got to find Kane," he spoke with a hint of resentment in his voice.

"What do you mean?" Lew asked.

"I'm a soldier," he said with chattering teeth. "A guardsmen of this outpost, and I got to report for duty."

"A hint of that officer within him felt proud of the young soldier. "I understand, thank you."

With trembling courage, they turned away from the gruesome battle scene, his eyes scanning the dimly lit interior of the outpost. With every step, he followed the trail of blood, each crimson mark a grim reminder of the ever present horror.

"Richard!" Lew shouted in the now muffled corridors of the interior facility.

Within these walls, the malevolent presence of the undead had not yet reached. It provided a stark sanctuary from the chaos. The two couldn't help but feel a glimmer of relief as they moved forward. Though the crowing sounds of combat continuously challenged that, keeping Cole on guard.

The pristine interior, untouched by the gruesome horrors of the battlefield, was marred only by the haunting trail of blood that Richard had left behind. As the men followed these macabre

breadcrumbs, the scene gradually transformed from mere stains into grotesque pools of crimson.

With each step, Lew's heart sank deeper with concern. The pools of blood seemed to grow larger and more foreboding as they ventured further into the once spotless corridors. Unable to contain his worry, he shouted, "Richard!"

From the coordinators ahead of them, Richard's voice let out a low groan of pain. The two men picked up their pace, and in front of them, the two men saw a pair of bloody legs sticking out of an open door.

"Richard!" Lew's voice rang out as he dashed forward. He peered into the doorway and saw the injured man lying there, his body covered in a chaotic tapestry of glass and wooden splinters. "Come on, Cole, we need to move him."

Cole nodded, scanning the area for anything that could help. His eyes fell on some old drapes that had been hung to add a touch of homeliness to the cold metal hallway. He ripped the fabric off the wall and spread it on the ground. "Let's place him on this and drag him!"

As if in response, a deafening roar of thunderous chaos erupted, drowning out the ongoing battle. The building quaked, causing the men to stumble and clutch the wall desperately, struggling to maintain some balance. In an instant, the interior of the structure plunged into impenetrable darkness, shrouding them in an oppressive void before emergency lights flickered to life. A subsequent roar reverberated through the base, accompanied by yet another jarring crash that sent shockwaves coursing through the facility. With a gulp of fear, Lew and Cole quickly placed Richard

atop the fabric and began to rush forward, navigating the crimson hued corridors of the now trembling outpost.

Outpost 13:

The outpost erupted in flames. Julian scanned the area, his vision blurred from the magnificent corpse of the beast they had been cheering moments ago.

"I don't see a damn thing, wait... There." Around the body of the great beast, the moving wheels of an armored vehicle came into view. His scope settled on a single head peering out from the top hatch, and in his crosshairs, an undead soldier was so close that he could read the insignia on his shoulder. "No... They're turned SO-13 guardsmen! Armed with artillery!"

Through the beast's unnatural gaze, it met Julian's eyes, sending a fearful shiver through the young sniper's body. "It sees me... No." He took aim at the creature and, with a single round, removed its head. In response, he looked down the barrel of the armored vehicle, which was slowly realigning its aim at the tower. "Move, we need to move now!" Julian turned and slid down the ladder, tearing his gloves in the process.

Tommie didn't say a word; he didn't have to. The veteran knew that when a sniper took off running, you ran your ass off. He slid down the ladder right behind him. The two men were worse for wear but wasted no time.

"What did you say back there?" Tommie asked as they ran.

Julian stopped for a moment and screamed into the open mic for all

to hear, "The enemy has commandeered armored forces!" Before anyone could reply the tower exploded into a magnificent ball of flame, and a portion of wall came crumbling down with it. "No..."

Tommie tried to turn and run, but as he did, a piece of steel pierced through his bag of gadgets, ripping into his lungs and sending him to the ground. Julian had fallen alongside him under much lighter debris.

Julian's body was rushing with adrenaline, he jumped to his feet, thinking Tommie would be right next to him, he looked down at his friend and turned his head at the sight. Julian glanced at his wrist monitor:

[ONLINE] B. Tommie

Status: EAN (emergency aid needed)

Vital Signs: CDI (critical death imminent)

... UPDATING...REVISING...

[KIA] B. Tommie

Status: Inactive

Vital Signs: Deceased

"I'm sorry, Tommie..." Julian understood what was about to come through those gates, and he wasn't going to wait for it. He knelt beside his friend, took his dog tags, and released his drones, allowing them to seek vengeance on behalf of the person who had cared for them. "Go get 'em little buddies, search, scan, and destroy." He turned away as he heard the first rounds of projectiles escaped the drones. "Breach!" he yelled over the mic, though he was sure everyone knew by now. Nonetheless he had to give his fellow guardsmen the warning.

Julian rushed through the slurry of wet snow under his feet, ripping off the now hot weather gear that left him sweaty. “All units, report to transport station A or B to hold until transport arrives!” he heard Kane’s voice over the radio; as he ran a familiar hand pulled at his side, he turned and locked eyes with Gallows. Among all the chaos and anarchy, just seeing her calmed his nerves. He wanted to kiss and take her right there in the snow, let the zombies have them when they were done with each other, but she was too professional for that.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, after reality set in. “I thought you were at the clinic.”

“There is no more clinic,” she replied. “I needed to see you, I saw Tommie’s vitals and I knew he was with you...”

The sound of the undead flowing through the buildings behind them drew their attention. “We need to go,” Julian said.

The facility had transformed into a nightmare of gore and fire. Walls crumbled, and the undead rushed in from unknown locations. There were screams of soldiers and the sound of running men, all converging on the empty transport stations with no vehicles, to do nothing but wait for the inevitable.

The two ran towards site A, only to notice a rush of civilians and wounded. The soldiers gathering around were defenders first and foremost, led by none other than Hector, seemingly the last Sergeant on the field. He saw his friend and wasted no time approaching them. “There you are!”

“Hector, looks like you got a pretty good force here.”

“Yeah, over 200 soldiers ready to defend this position until the transports get here.”

“Where do you need us?” Gallows asked.

He looked at his friends with conviction, “We need reinforcements at landing zone B. There is almost no one there and many soldiers looking for an exit. The transports will land here first, everyone knows A comes first ya know? A lot of people are headed this way...”

Julian didn't hesitate, he and Gallows both saluted him. “Yes, sir!” they said before rushing off to site B.

Hector kept his eyes on his friends as they left, he had no idea what awaited them. He turned to look upon his defenders. The undead horde drew nearer, their grotesque figures emerging from the smoky ruins of the facility. Hector barked orders, positioning his men strategically, creating a defensive perimeter. Their rifles were ready, and their resolve unbreakable.

Each soldier under Hector's command knew this was a fight for their lives, and they were determined to make every bullet count. Amid the deafening cacophony of gunfire, Hector stood tall, his commanding presence inspiring those around him. His rifle spat fire, each shot finding its mark with deadly precision. Beside him, his soldiers fought like warriors of old, their faces etched with grim determination.

Explosions rocked the battlefield as grenades were hurled into the oncoming horde, sending limbs and torsos flying. The air was thick with the acrid stench of gunpowder and the sickly-sweet odor of decaying flesh. As the men grew weary, the sound of nearby transports landing to load the civilians gave them a boon of energy to continue the defensive onslaught.

Realizing that escape was slipping away, Hector's eyes blazed with determination. With a resounding battle cry, he rallied his men

for one final, audacious charge. The defenders, driven by sheer adrenaline and unwavering loyalty, surged forward, their rifles roaring defiance.

As they cut through the undead's front line, the battle reached its crescendo. Limbs and bodies flew through the air as grenades exploded amidst the horde. The ground trembled beneath the onslaught, and the air was filled with the tumultuous clash of war. Hector led the way, his heart pounding with adrenaline. Every step was a testament to their determination to survive. He knew this might be their only chance for escape, and he fought like a man possessed. His rifle became an extension of his will, spewing a storm of bullets that mowed down the approaching undead.

As the defenders reached the waiting transports, hope seemed within their grasp. But just then, a massive explosion ripped through the battlefield. The ground shook violently, and a wall of fire and smoke billowed toward them. Spreading the bile of Hector upon his defending warriors, causing a route to the final transport, the defense was lost some 23 minutes after Gallows and Julian were ordered to site B.

Facility Interior:

The sensation of the walls closing in was so palpable that Lew couldn't discern whether they were physically shifting or if it was simply his mind playing cruel tricks. A litany of anxieties clamored within him, each one fervently urging him to escape, to find refuge anywhere. As his eyes fixated on the exit door ahead, he was hit with a jolt of energy that propelled him forward. With a resounding

crash, they burst through the door, reemerging onto the chaotic battlefield. Richard did his best to hold on, his voice was raspy, and his breathing was growing heavy. His eyes widened, everything around him shifted, his motives, his reasonings, everyone around him. All of it vanished. Everything in front of his very eyes demanded every ounce of his attention. The roars of anguish crushed him.

Intense waves of heat washed over Lew as his eyes captured the distant eruptions, casting a light upon the recognizable silhouettes of artillery mortars. These explosive blasts mercilessly rained down upon the base, each detonation unleashing a bone-rattling shockwave. Lew's legs gave way, and he crumpled to the ground, his gaze transfixed on the unfolding catastrophe. His heart sank as the medical ward crumbled in upon itself, disintegrating into debris.

Lew couldn't bring himself to fully look upon the courtyard, instead, he caught a glimpse, from the corner of his eye, of a single wall crumbling to the ground. He was acutely aware of the vivid bursts of gunfire and the valiant yet desperate voices of soldiers refusing to yield was more than sufficient. Lew, was going to die a ward hand under an officer he hated, in a base at the ass end of the lands of light. This was it... He crumbled at the thought, lying flat on the ground and staring to the empty twilight sky above.

"Hey, Lew, what are you doing?!" Cole's voice echoed from afar.

A solitary hand entered Lew's field of vision, shielding his eyes from the tumult beyond and gripping him with unwavering strength. It was the hand of Lieutenant Kane Brikter, who pulled Lew up from the ground and locked eyes with him. "The battlefield

belongs to the dead," Kane growled, his voice unyielding. "But you're still breathing, it's bad out there! They got artillery, Lew. The thing's apprehended artillery units and were holding us off until we ran out of air support! The battles lost soldier, now, let's go!" He pressed a weighty sidearm into Lew's hand and urged him forward. "Take that wounded man to the landing zone, do you see it?" Kane pointed into the distance, where an array of floodlights pierced the twilight sky, drawing closer by the second. "The transports; they're here! We'll hold the line as long as we can. Go, Lew!" Kane looked over at the shaken private. "Cole..." His eyes shifted down to the wounded man. "Go with him. You're a good soldier."

Cole nodded, feeling guilt build within him. "Thank you, sir." From the corner of his eye, Kane leaned in to Cole and whispered into his ear, "That man's dead already...Get to the outpost, secure it, prepare a last stand position. Try to keep Lew cool, we don't need him breaking anymore than he already has. I fear he might think he's alive..."

Cole looked down at Richard, seeing his chest move, and small bits of blood still seep from his wounds. He was in bad condition, but he was not dead. "Sir... Okay." He didn't know what else to say, his eyes glanced around for some kind of military aid. In the corner of his eye he saw Gallows and Jullian, both worse for wear.

"Cole!" Gallows said.

Julian gave Cole an approving glance but looked as if he was suffering from heatstroke. "Water..." One of the defenders rushed a bottle to him quickly, as even more soldiers rushed in. Each ready to take their stand, sadly there were no personnel or wounded.

“Gallows, we need help,” Cole asked, hinting towards Richard. She looked down in confusion. “He looks like he’s been gone for a while...”

“What? Bullshit!” Lew took a step forward, upset by the notion. Both he and Cole saw Richard breathing, and suffering.

“Just take him to the transport station and wait there!” Kane ordered again.

Lew marched alongside Cole, dragging Richard behind them. Resisting the urge to look back, driven by a complex mixture of emotions that surged through him. A sense of guilty relief coursed through his veins, infusing with an unexpected burst of energy. He marveled at how far he had come, yet the thought of giving up now loomed like a dark specter. The transport landing zone lay just a 4-minute jog away from his current position.

The men passed the docking center, where a web of loading and unloading lines crisscrossed the area. A massive and formidable gate, poised to drop at the flip of a switch behind the guard's post, stood ready to divide the docking center from the landing zone. Lew couldn't help but deduce that this location might serve as a fallback point, and the men wasted no time in preparing for the impending struggle. After making Richard as comfortable as possible, the men upended tables and strategically arranged solid objects to construct a makeshift barricade, a last line of defense in case the current crisis was not yet their final stand.

They took a step back to admire their work.

"Not bad, I guess," Cole said. He turned to Lew. "Alright, I've got to go."

"What?" Lew asked.

"I need to, Lew. I'm a soldier," Cole explained. "I need to be with my fellow soldiers..." Lew simply nodded. The two men stood frozen for a long moment before Cole turned and walked away.

Lew stood there staring at the docking station, half expecting Cole to turn back. He knew better, they barely knew one another and his very own squad was out there, the very people who he fought side by side with. Lew looked into a puddle of water, finally getting a glimpse of his messy face. He looked like an undead. Dead...The word shot through his mind, he turned and glared at Richard.

"Richard," Lew ran to his side, his movements quickening as he knelt beside the lone survivor of Science Outpost 13. "Richard... I'm so sorry," the words heavy in the air, punctuated by the nearby bursts of gunfire, presumably Kane's front line.

Suddenly, a faint, guttural chuckle escaped from Richard's cracked lips, the eerie sound sending shivers down Lew's spine. With an unnatural agility, Richard's body contorted and twisted, bones cracking and reshaping into grotesque forms. His skin stretched and tore, revealing sickly pale flesh beneath. Lew watched in horror as the transformation unfolded before him.

His eyes, now a fiery crimson, seemed to glow with malevolence. Jagged, elongated teeth protruded from his twisted, contorted mouth, dripping with a viscous, black ichor that glistened in the dim light. "You carried me all this way? I knew you were a good candidate."

Lew stumbled backward, his heart pounding with terror. The Vetala's malevolent gaze bore into him, and it let out a chilling, otherworldly laugh that seemed to resonate with the very darkness

itself. Lew realized that he was no longer dealing with his comrade, but a creature of the night that hungered for his soul.

In a voice that sent shivers down Lew's spine, the Vetala whispered, "You should have stayed with the dead, Lew Soon. Now, you shall become one with the shadows." With a sudden burst of supernatural speed, it lunged at him, its clawed fingers outstretched, ready to claim Lew and transform him into a creature of eternal darkness. "I want you," the creature took a deep and lustful whiff. "You're like me, you're. Hungry..." The creature grinned before lifting a single finger and peered deep into his eyes.

Something utterly horrifying occurred. Their consciousnesses, like two swirling mists, intertwined and then swapped. The Vetala's dark and sinister awareness slipped into Lew's mind, and in return, Lew's terrified consciousness was trapped within the creature's thoughts.

For Lew, it was like being plunged into a never-ending nightmare. He could feel the Vetala's wickedness, its insatiable hunger, and its utter lack of empathy. He sensed its joy at inhabiting a living body, at having control over its new vessel. It was a sensation of profound dread and hopelessness. He could feel himself being ripped away from his own mind, as if he were slipping into a deep darkness.

His senses slowly faded, feeling as if a veil were thrown over his physical form and his mind drifted far away. "Lew," a dark whisper echoed through the eternal abyss. "Welcome..."

Lew's eyes opened, the sound of the transports engines blaring filled his ears, he looked around in dread, to find himself sat upright buckled in a seat. "What, what happened?"

“You’re alright, you’re okay,” the medic said he held Lew back with his hand. “Everything’s okay. You made it. You’re going to be alright.”

Lew nodded as the events slowly returned to his mind, yet with them there was no heavy sensation in his heart. He felt lighter, he felt confident, he felt good inside. He looked about the transport and saw a sleeping Kane with the remainder of his men, including a sleeping Cole, then he shifted his head and looked outward towards the abyssal sky, the far end holding only darkness. Yet something seemed pleasant about that darkness, something seemed, right. He sat up as a small smile crept across his face. “Where are we going?” he asked the medic.

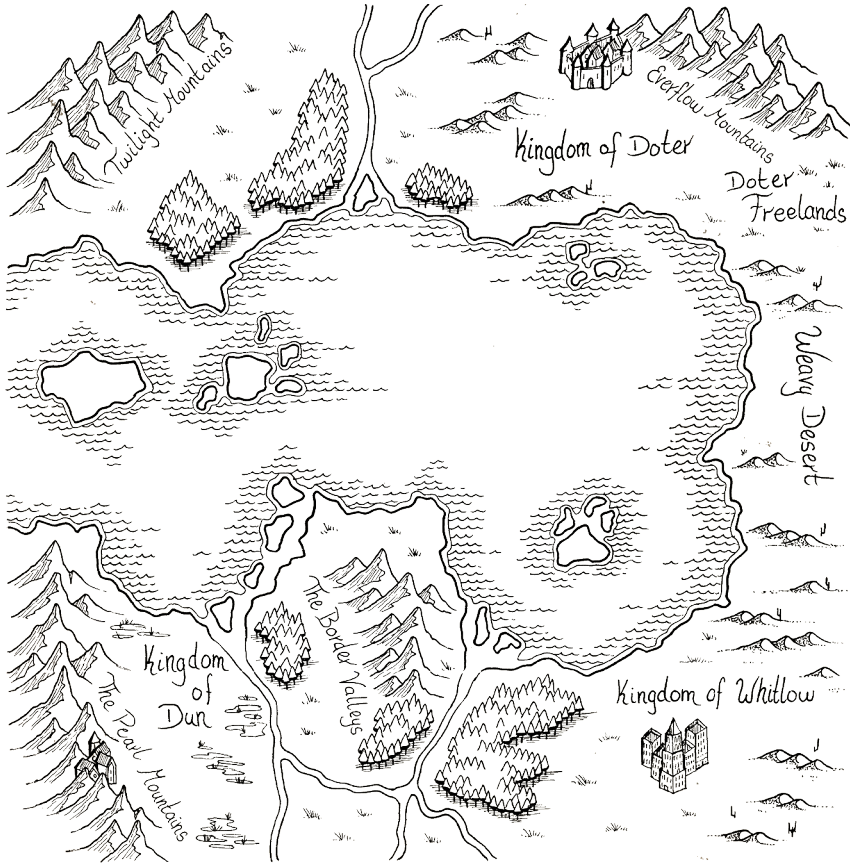
“We’re going to Comms Outpost 11, they’re pushing us back pretty hard.”

“The undead? I doubt they’ll make it this far.”

The medic didn’t reply, he had a hesitant look in his eye and turned away, tending to a wounded man on the floor between them.

The Vetala sat back in its seat and whispered, “I owe you my life.”

MAP OF THE LANDS OF LIGHT



Thank You For Reading!

This was an endeavour of a piece to write, down to the last moment if I am to be so honest. I hope the effort that went into the production of this story is felt, thank you so much for taking the time to read my latest writings.

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