

He ran. The fire around him burned his village to the ground. The flames roared as did the savages that were causing this. The boy's house was already ash. He wore a black, long-sleeved t-shirt, a denim jacket, jeans, long socks, and tennis shoes. Timothy was very warm under all of those clothes, but he knew he wouldn't have time to struggle any of it off.

Savages ran through the street with their advanced weaponry and threatening war cries as they slaughtered children and families. There was no hope of mercy or being saved by any grace. They had no grace to give. The savages only wanted death to Timothy and his people.

Tears rushed to fall down his face. *BANG!* He heard a cry from his left. They were his father's. Timothy dug his heels into the ground and swung around to see his father screaming with a grape-sized bullet hole right through his calf. His mother helped his father limp forward as she screamed, "Run, Timothy!".

The boy didn't know what else to do, so he obeyed his mother. He ran. As the moon rose, he entered the thick of the forest surrounding his city. Trees surrounded him as he sprinted through. He always loved running, but his track practice could have never prepared him for the uneven terrain of the dense forest.

Timothy began to slow down but kept jogging. He started to think, which turned out not to do much good. The boy didn't know what happened to his parents, or his friends. All he knows is that they weren't with him. They won't be with him anymore. The nineteen-year-old didn't know what to do. He feared for the worst.

He started to walk, fatigued from all the running so far. It was well past his bedtime, too. He could feel his exhaustion catch up to him, but he managed to find some soothingly cool rock to close his eyes on.

THE NEXT DAY

Timothy woke up in a crevice between two large rocks. He squeezed out of it and started walking. He was hoping to find a city. Or his parents. He decided to try and walk back to his village, to check if there was anything left to salvage.

The closest city to his village was Galos—which was a good four-or-five-days walk away. From what he learned in health class, a human can only live up to three days without water. For supplies, he would have to head home—back to Ancalas. He walked through the forest. All he saw were trees. The birds and insects mixed with his footsteps, the tender

The walk back took about three hours. He saw his city. The ashes from the burned-down buildings burned his nose. He walked through the ashes trying to find his home.

Something fell. He turned his head and saw a road sign. It was bent and not helpful, so he just kept walking. He got to where his house used to be and began to scavenge. He found a fireproof backpack (He begged his parents to get it for him because it looked really cool). His parents weren't much for preparers, so every food they had was now charcoal. He kept searching for supplies. Then, he heard a large metal creak come from behind.

Timothy lunged backwards as he turned around. The creaking happens again, now with a large slam as the hatch closes. He squinted through the ashes as they flew into the air from the gust of wind. As the ashes settled, he saw a little girl. She looked around ten, maybe even nine. Timothy slowly approached her. The girl held a sunhat with a teddy bear inside. Soot covered her face and clothes. Timothy noted her clothes. A sundress, leggings, and a pair of black dress shoes. She stared at Timothy in fear as he approached. She looked like she had just woken up as she coughed out soot and rubbed her face.

He held his hands to his chest, palms facing the girl. He wanted to show that he wasn't going to hurt her. The girl started to walk towards Timothy, albeit cautiously. Timothy knelt down and held his arms out, looking like he was asking for a hug. He thought, "She must've been hiding somewhere," as she approached.

The girl slowly stepped until she was around 3 feet away from Timothy. She stopped. She must've been pretty short. The 19-year-old, Timothy, was almost 5 foot 4. This girl seemed to be 4 foot 2.

Timothy slowly got up and put his hands back on his chest. The girl warily walked to Timothy's side and hugged him. She yawned. Timothy didn't know who this girl was, but he wanted to keep her safe.

The girl looked around and asked Timothy, "Do you know where my mommy is?"

Timothy choked and felt tears well in his eyes. He set his gaze on the girl. He told her with pessimistic comfort, "Don't worry, she's in a better place now. Who knows? Maybe you'll see her again someday."

The girl peeked up at Timothy and smiled. He felt horrible. The girl got off of him, and took the teddy bear out of her sun hat. "Okay! I'm Olivia! What's your name?" She cheered as she placed her hat on her head as she swung her head around happily.

A sympathetic smile formed as he pet the girl's head. "I'm Timothy. It's good to meet you, Olivia."

Olivia danced around as Timothy went back to grabbing things. She asked, "Why are you going in my family's stuff?"

Timothy told her, "It's not safe here anymore. We need to grab everything necessary so we can get out and live somewhere else."

Olivia cheered, "Okay! Will my mommy and daddy be there?" as she started walking.

Timothy looked up, thinking about how to tell her. He hated lying, especially to a girl so young. When he turned to look at her, she was gone.

Timothy heard the loud metal creaking sound again. He turned to his right to see Olivia opening a metal hatch colored black by the ashes on it. She hopped onto a ladder and climbed down. Timothy followed. Olivia grabbed her sunhat from her head and placed several dehydrated food packets and water into it. Timothy stopped her, saying, "You have a bunker?"

Olivia hopped to her left to look at Timothy. "Yep!" She cheered as she held out her sunhat.

She picked up a packet and handed it to him. "Want some? It's not like normal food. We've had it for *yeaaaaars*! And it's *still* good!"

Olivia questioned, "Wait. What even happened out here? Where did everybody go? I was in the bunker last night playing Apocalypse."

Timothy's throat felt stuck. He tried to choke out the words that wouldn't make Olivia sob. He didn't want to hurt her. He told her slowly, trying to find the right words, "Well. There were these really mean guys. They were carrying fire and throwing it at people. Some of the other Ancologites, like me and you, were able to avoid it and run away from them. The fire was thrown at our buildings and it burned down the whole town."

"Did my parents run?"

"Uhh. Yeah!"

Olivia cheered and hopped in the air like a little bunny. "Now I *can't* stay here," he realized as Olivia commanded, "Let's go find them! Which way did they go?"

Timothy lied to her again, "Well, I'm not good with cardinal directions. They were going to my right, I think."

Olivia hummed, “Oh well. Okay! They should come by any time now to pick me up! They might even bring you!”.

Timothy shook his head and packed some more supplies in his backpack. He told her, “It’s not safe here. They wouldn’t come back. There might be some bad guys still here. We can leave a note for them in case they do, though. You should get some stuff too. Find a bag and fill it up with food and water. I’ll find something to use as a tent. This will be a long trip.”

Olivia pulled out a camouflage duffel bag with wheels about as big as Timothy and filled it with food, non-perishable snacks, and water bottles. She grabbed Timothy’s backpack and put it in her duffel bag while he was finding something to use as shelter. He sees a large, plastic tarp and decides to grab it.

Olivia asked, “Who are the bad guys that burned down our home?”.

Timothy thought for a moment as he folds the tarp. There were only a handful of organized countries in the land, but all of them were small enough to be more like neighboring cities. “Well, out of the 4 places in the world, well, 3 cities now that our’s is burned down. I gotta think about that.”

Olivia said, “Kenon, Xancia, Galos, and us!”

Timothy nodded his head, “Yep!”.

Olivia said, “I think it’s Xancia! When my class went there for a field trip, one of the kids stole my lunch!”.

Timothy thought for a bit. “No, they don’t have the money for the tech they had. All of those high-tech weapons like the Static-Riptide and the Horse Basher are *way* out of reach money-wise for a place like *Xancia*.”

Olivia nodded her head like she understood. She asked, “But what if they stole it?!”.

Timothy had to give a bit of thought. It wouldn’t be above the Xancians to have stolen thousands of dollars of weapons. But Timothy shook his head, “They’re smart enough to know that demolishing the towns that give them hundreds of thousands of dollars a year is a stupid idea.”

Olivia nodded understandingly. She walked around the bunker a bit more. Timothy filled Olivia’s duffel bag with stuff and zipped it shut. He attempted to heave it up. Olivia shouts to him, “Lift with your legs!”.

He struggled a bit more, but eventually got the duffle bag up. Olivia rushed to the ladder and hopped up it. He and Olivia get out of the bunker. Olivia waited for Timothy as he got up the ladder with probably 50 pounds of stuff on his back. He, eventually, made it up and led the way. Olivia told Timothy, “Wait, I thought you said they went to your *right!*”.

Timothy’s breath hitched. He turned to face Olivia with a small smile. He lied to her, “I was heading,” he pointed to his left, “that way when I saw them. They should have gone this way.”

Olivia shrugged, “Oh. Okay!”.

Timothy continued to lead the way. Eventually, Olivia started to walk around him in circles as they trekked into the forest towards a stream. Timothy told Olivia, “This stream goes down to Galos. If anyone’s going anywhere, it should be this way.”

Olivia asked, “I thought you knew where they went.”

“Where were your parents last night? When the bad guys came? Why did they leave you home alone in that bunker?”.

Olivia hummed, “Well Mommy was grocery shopping last night and Daddy was on a business trip in Kenon, but he should be in Galos right now. It was a long trip.”

Timothy didn’t like how she pronounced Kenon. He corrected her, “Kee-non. Not Keh-nun.”

Olivia rolled her eyes, “Okay. Well my dad is in Galos, but he should be heading to Kenon right now.” She pronounced it wrong again.

Timothy sighed, “Alright.”

Olivia told Timothy, “So is Kenon this way?”.

Timothy nodded his head, “Yeah. It’s a bit farther down from Galos.”

Olivia nodded her head and looked ahead. She continued to walk circles around Timothy as they walked along the stream. The sun rose and set. Fireflies began to sprinkle and light up the grass. An unfamiliar voice called out to them, “Hello?”.

Olivia whispered to Timothy, “Did you hear that?”.

Timothy looked around, trying to see where the voice was from. “I-. Yeah. I heard that too.”

The two heard leaves rustle. Branches break. A figure fell from the treeline in front of them. The shadow smiles and repeats, “Hello?”.

Timothy gulped and extended his hand. The lowered sun made it difficult to see more than just a figure among darkness. He choked out a soft “Hello.”

“Dude, calm down. I’m not gonna kill you or anything. Yet.” A pause ensues before he laughs maniacally at the Ancalogites frozen in fear still. He continues, “I’m Jack, short for Jaquez. It’s a family name.”

Timothy tensed as Jack shook his hand a little too firmly for a little too long. Timothy asked, “Xancian?”.

“Yeah. A bunch of lunatics burned down my house. And my friends’ houses. And my friends.”

Timothy muttered, “Oh.”

Jack shrugged, “Yeah, the us. But, like, a lot more than usual.”

Timothy tilts his head at Jack’s slang, shortening ‘usual’ as if it took up too much time to say fully. He whispered to Jack, “The same thing happened to our town as well.”

Jack replied in his regular, loud tone of voice, “What are we whispering for?”.

Timothy gestured his head toward Olivia. Jack shrugged, “So?”.

“I don’t wanna make her sad.”

“So?”.

“What do you mean ‘So?’”.

“Why should I care? All of both of our friends and family are dead.” Jack turned his head to face Olivia with a grin as he continued, “And the same goes for you, Princess.”

Olivia looked up to Timothy with big, puppy-like eyes. She asked him, “Is he true?”.

Timothy couldn’t help but avoid eye contact with Olivia. He just couldn’t bear lying to her face. He smiled, “No, Olivia. I’m sure your parents are out there somewhere.”

Olivia teared up. “Don’t lie.”

Timothy turned to face Olivia. He asked, “You said your dad was in Kenon, right? Maybe he’s still there.”

“What about my mommy?”.

Timothy pulled his sleeve down and wiped a tear off of Olivia’s face, “I’m sure your dad knows where your mom is. Okay?”.

Olivia nodded her head, “Okay.”

Jack scoffed, “Kenon. They’re probably the ones that did it.”

Timothy tasked, “That may be true. It may not be safe there right now. We should just focus on getting to Galos first.” Timothy reached for Olivia’s hand, “Okay? We’ll stay there for a night before going to find your dad and mom.”

Olivia nodded her head, “Okay.”

Timothy and Olivia started to walk down the stream once more. The water rumbled, which went unnoticed to the two Ancalogites. Jack grabbed Timothy’s shoulder, stopping Timothy. Jack told him, “Don’t go yet.”

Timothy didn’t look at Jack. “We don’t feel safe here.”

“Well start.” Jack grabbed Timothy and led him to a tree.

Timothy tilted his head. “A tree. Okay, you’ve lost me.”

“Cover,” Jack corrects him.

Suddenly, Jack punched the tree. A hollow *thunk* sounded. A branch fell. “This one’s dead.” He walked to a different tree and punched it. Leaves rustled, but the sound was full and sturdy. “This one’s good.”

Jack jumped up and grabbed a branch. He lifted himself up and grabbed Timothy. He hauled Timothy up, ripping Olivia’s hand away from him. “Don’t cry.”

Jack set Timothy on the branch and reached for Olivia, who refused to hold his hand. Olivia pouted. “You’re mean.”

Jack snarled. “*You’ll be alive.*”

Jack reached down and grabbed Olivia by the shoulders and hauled her up, scaring her, causing her to start crying. He set her on the branch next to Timothy. He shushed her. He ordered her in a whispered tone, “Cram it.”

Timothy asked, “What are you whisperi-.” Jack shoved his hand over Timothy’s mouth. Jack held Timothy’s and his own breath. Olivia copied them. She reached for and grabbed Timothy’s hand. A pause ensued as the trio waited. Jack watched the floor while Timothy and Olivia watched each other, scared. It was quiet.

Then, the thunders of horse hooves echoed through the forest. A herd of troops flooded underneath the trio. The army below screamed in unison as they trampled over the grass through the forest. As soon as they arrived, they left. It was quiet again.

Jack pulled away from Timothy. Olivia was trembling as she held onto Timothy's hand. Jack muttered with a blank expression, "You're welcome."

Olivia steadied her breathing. She turned and one of her hands slipped away from Timothy's. She looked up to Jack with a smile and big, grateful eyes. She whispered, "You saved us."

Jack turned his head and huffed. "I said you're welcome."

Jack looked up, away from the two. Olivia sat on the branch and stared at him with her bright eyes. She told him with a grateful smile, "I think I can find my parents with your help."

Jack rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't count on it."

Olivia tilted her head, "But there's still a chance, right?"

Jack kept his head turned, but glanced at Olivia from the corner of his eyes. He smiled. "Nah. Your parents are dead."

Olivia pouted, "You're mean."

Jack laughed, "And *you're* alive." He paused before his smirk turned to a shit-eating grin. He chuckled and continued, "Unlike your mommy and daddy."

Timothy shooed Jack away. "Don't say that! I'm sure Olivia's dad is alive and well and he'll know exactly what happened to her mother."

Jack hummed before telling Timothy, "Just keep dreaming. I guess that'll get you to Kenon quicker."

Timothy corrected him, "We're going to Galos first."

Jack questioned him, "Why?"

"It's half way between us and Kenon."

"Why can't you go straight to Kenon?"

"It's too far away. We don't have the supplies for that."

"Yeah. I guess I would doubt your fishing abilities too, if I were you."

Timothy scoffed. "I can fish."

Jack grinned and hummed. He responded with a slight laugh, "Maybe, if you try hard enough, you could catch yourself some algae."

Olivia raised her hand and bounced on the branch. "Oo! Oo! I caught a minnow once!"

Jack scoffed, "Ancalogites, terrible at everything."

Timothy muttered under his breath, “Typical Xancian, borrows thousands from our government, then calls *us* incapable.”

Jack shrugged, “You guys keep giving us money, why would you expect us to start working for a living when we can destroy property for one instead?”.

Timothy sighed, “I never said I was supportive of our government's actions.”

“And yet you use it to get a better-than-thou standing.”

“You started it.”

“Only because it’s true.”

“Is what I said not?”.

“It is.” Jack shrugged. “But why should the esteemed Ancalogite expect any more from the lesser-than Xancian?”.

Timothy rolled his eyes. “Look, I’m sorry. Let’s just-. Olivia and I will get going now. Thank you for your help.”

Timothy hopped out of the tree. He landed on a hard root with the outside of his foot. He crumpled to the floor.

Jack lowered himself from the branch and dropped himself off at a safe distance. He turned around and reached up. Olivia dropped herself into his arms with a gleeful cheer. He set Olivia down.

Timothy stood up and attempted to continue walking. He didn’t go far. With a yelp, he dropped to the floor again. He gripped his now-sprained ankle, writhing in pain.

Jack grabbed Timothy’s shoulder. “You aren’t going far like this.”

Timothy swatted Jack away. With venom on his tongue, he hissed, “I noticed.”

“Stand up.” Timothy did so as well as he could, but he wobbled on one leg. Jack pulled Olivia to Timothy’s good side.

“Hold him up.” She did so. Jack grabbed some branches and stripped them from their bark. He fashioned the branches around Timothy’s foot and lower leg, creating a makeshift something or other to take the weight off his foot and transfer it to his upper calf instead.

Timothy tilted his head, curious to what Jack was doing to his leg. Honestly, the sudden resourcefulness surprised him. Timothy asked, “What are you doing? Wouldn’t it be easier to just give me some crutches?”.

“Shove it.” Timothy did so.

Timothy and Olivia stood in silence, too curious about what Jack was doing to ask questions. Jack crouched over Timothy’s ankle in silence, too focused on creating this contraption to speak. The only noise was the rustling of the stripped branches and bark, the river flowing beside them, and the fireflies. Jack explained, “Try running with branches for crutches.”

As Jack finished brandishing the Something or Other, he grabbed a thick, greenish yellow branch. He put the branch tightly in the middle. The last piece of the contraption. He stood up. He looked at Olivia. “You can let go now.”

Olivia backed off of Timothy. Timothy put his rolled ankle on the floor, but the contraption prevented any weight from getting on his foot. Timothy’s eyebrows raised as he watched the contraption hold some weight. He took a step and put all his weight on the contraption. Not even a slight bend. Timothy’s mouth was agape. “Huh.”

Jack snorted, “You’re welcome.”

Timothy turned to Jack, his mouth still hanging. Jack grinned, “What? Don’t have fancy *branches* where you guys are from?”

Timothy shook his head, “No I-. Well yeah but. How did you do that?”

“Just watched it happen.” Jack snickered. Timothy stared at his ankle some more. Jack grinned, “Or did you not expect a Xancian to help you out?”

Timothy snapped his head up and waved his hands in front of him. He stammered, “No! I just. I’m just surprised, is all.”

Jack rolled his eyes, “Sure. Just don’t mess with it. Being a medic’s enough, I’m not gonna be your repairman too.”

Timothy nodded his head and looked back at his ankle. The brace was firm and sturdy. He probably couldn’t break it if he tried. Olivia looked at the brace, then at Jack. She exclaimed, “Wow! That was so cool! How’d you learn that?”

Jack shrugged. He answered Olivia, “The hard way.”

Olivia’s smile faded. She reached to Jack and pulled on the sleeve of his shirt. She asked, “Do you wanna come with us?”

Jack looked at Olivia. The dark night prohibited him from seeing much more than a small silhouette. He smiles. “Sure.”

Olivia jumped and cheered. She grabbed Timothy and pulled Jack to him for an unsolicited, unwanted, group hug. Jack's smile stayed quiet, but having been pulled from the shadows, Timothy saw it. Timothy smiled as well.

THE NEXT DAY

Timothy woke up in the tree from last night, suspended by a nest of branches and paracords, his good leg strapped on the tree in every way he could get it too. His leg with the brace was hanging from the branch. He didn't want to risk breaking it by tying it up, even if it looked super sturdy. He feared that one branch falling out would break the whole thing. If he had to put money on it, he'd say the green-yellow branch in the middle of it all, the one Jack had put in last.

Olivia was resting peacefully, lying down in a hammock made of a blanket and rope. Jack was straddling a branch next to Olivia, his hands resting in his lap as he slept. His head was tilted towards Olivia. Timothy wiped his eyes and saw the sun rising. He looked down to Olivia and Jack. He tried to move, but remembered he was tied up. He undid the cords wrapped around his leg and body. He wrapped up the cords and put them in the duffel bag he got from Olivia's bunker.

Timothy climbed down to the two, careful not to touch his injured foot on anything. The brace seemed sturdy, but again, he didn't want to test its durability or Jack's patience. He settled himself on a sturdy branch next to them. He looked at Jack and had to half-close his eyes. He thought to himself, "Geez, has this guy seen the sun before?"

Timothy looked away from the light reflector that was Jack and turned his eyes to Olivia. He sighed and watched Olivia breathe quietly. He imagined Olivia would be how his sister, Alisa, would look if she was still alive. The two had the same orange-toned burnt caramel skin tone, which contrasted to Timothy's blue-undertoned tan skin and Jack's ghostly white, grey skin. Olivia and Alisa both had bright red-brown hair that goes straight down. The same deer-in-the-headlight, sparkly, baby blue, velvet eyes that make it impossible to want to hurt them. At that moment, he promised himself that he would protect her. He would never let anything bad happen to her. Nothing would ever hurt her again.

"What are you staring at, weirdo?"

Timothy snapped back to reality. He looked at Jack with a surprised face as he hummed, “Hm?”.

Jack sighed, “That face, Timothy. You look like you’re having war flashbacks.”

Timothy looked at Jack and squinted. Jack chuckled and asked, “Too bright?”. Timothy nodded his head. Jack laughed at Timothy. Timothy looked back to Olivia and sighed with a smile. Jack snorted, “I don’t know how you Ancalogites do it, but she’s a little young for you, don’t you think?”.

Timothy scoffed and huffed. “It’s not like that and you know it.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “I know.”

Timothy looked at Olivia’s closed eyes. Nothing would ever hurt her again. He told Jack, “She looks like my little sister.”

Jack, confused, looked at Timothy. “She isn’t?”.

“No. I met her yesterday when I was getting stuff.”

Jack hummed. “Well then. I guess, good for you then.”

Timothy turned his head to Jack with his eyes closed. He asked Jack, “Wait, why would you say that if you thought she’s my sister?”.

Jack shrugged. “To mess with you.” Timothy chuckled. Jack gasped with a fake surprise. “Wow, so the robot *does* think I’m funny!”. Timothy rolled his eyes.

Olivia, having been woken from the noise of the two boys, rubbed her eyes and rolled in her bed. She muttered, “Shush.”

Jack, not shushing, patted Olivia’s shoulder and left his hand on her back. Olivia groaned, “It’s, like, 2 in the morning.”

Jack corrected her, “It’s seven, Dear.”

Olivia rolled onto her back and swatted Jack’s hand away as he cackled. Olivia pouted. She took a second before she replied, “Timothy, he’s talking to you.” Timothy choked and Olivia giggled. Jack hacks out a loud laugh.

Jack jokingly corrected himself, “It is seven now, Dear Tim. We must start our way to Galos.”

Jack murmured to Timothy so that Olivia couldn’t hear, “If Galos is still there, obviously.”

Timothy wafted his hand in front of Jack's face. Jack leaned back and put his elbow on Olivia's shoulder. Olivia tried to push him off, but he didn't budge. Timothy asked Jack, "How old are you? Why are you talking like that?"

Jack shrugged, "14."

Olivia chimed in, "I'm 12."

Timothy finished, "I'm 19."

Jack choked on nothing and blurted, "Wow, you're short!"

Timothy grumbled at the 6 foot 2 boy, "Maybe you're just tall."

Jack snickered, "Hey, not a big deal man. We love a short king."

Timothy sighed, "Well, we should get started now. It won't be morning forever."

Olivia whined, "Awww."

Timothy asked Olivia as he slowly climbed down the tree, "You wanna see your dad, yeah?"

Olivia paused before answering, "Yeah."

Timothy gently dropped himself from a low branch, setting himself down safely on the floor. Jack helped Olivia pack the nest he made for her last night. Jack dropped the bag of stuff to the floor and hung from a branch over the bag before letting himself down. He landed safely on the plush bag. Timothy reached up for Olivia and watched as she tried to climb down the tree. She fell. Timothy lunges for her, but Jack catches her. Jack wasn't strong enough to fully break her fall, however. He barely slowed down her fall as he pulled her onto the duffel bag. Olivia pushed Jack away and wiped her hands on her shirt. Timothy panicked and tells Olivia, "Be more careful next time."

Olivia's eyes were tired and she could barely keep herself awake enough to stand. She told Timothy, "Accident."

Jack heaved the duffel bag full of stuff over his shoulder and started walking along the stream. The other two follow. Timothy asked Jack, "So, what were you doing when they came?"

Jack shrugged. "Probably something stupid."

Jack glanced at Timothy's brace with a grin, admiring his handiwork. He looked away and held his stomach gently with a huff.

Timothy asked, "When was the last time you ate?"

“Does it matter?”.

“Yes.”

Jack groaned. “I ate a few days ago. Those Kenons started burning the place down before lunch and I don’t eat breakfast.”

Timothy jogged up to Jack and grabbed the back of his upper arm. Timothy told him, “You need to eat more. Actually, we all should eat something.”

Jack’s ears perked up hearing Timothy say that. Jack shook his head. “I doubt either of you brought fishing equipment.”

“There are some dehydrated fruits and MRE’s in my bag. Also some water filters and canteens.”

The group turned a corner on the stream and continued to head down it. Jack stopped, causing Timothy and Olivia to stop as well, and Jack turned to face the two. He told Timothy, “It’d be so easy to kill both of you and survive by myself.”

Olivia was still tired and grouchy for a variety of reasons. She was too tired to be amused by his antics. Timothy asked, “So will you stop with us for some breakfast?”.

Olivia muttered, “Or you can just kill us and survive by yourself. Not like it matters.”

Jack heard Olivia mutter and chuckled. He sighed and wiped a nonexistent tear from his eye, “Aw, I think I struck a chord, huh?”. Jack put a hand on Olivia’s head. She swatted it away and grumbled. Jack raised an eyebrow and looked at Timothy, who shrugged.

Timothy sat down. So did Olivia. Timothy, to try and ease tension, blurted, “We should start eating now.”

Timothy put his backpack down and let go of Olivia’s hand to pull out some food. Olivia crossed her arms with a pout. Timothy laid some bags of food on the floor. Jack dropped the duffel bag and sat on it. Olivia turned away from the two and watched the forest, looking away from the stream.

Timothy filtered out some stream water and put the filtered water in an empty canteen. He handed the canteen to Jack, who chugged it all immediately. Timothy sighed and filled it up again, which was met with Jack chugging it all down again. Timothy filled it once more and Jack took it, then only sipped from the canteen.

Timothy filled another canteen and set it on the ground. He filled a third one for Olivia and turned to give it to her. She wasn't there. He panickedly asked, "Where's Olivia?"

Jack shrugged. He pointed down the stream, the way they came from. "That way."

Timothy swiveled his head around and shouted, "Olivia! Where are you, girl?"

"Girl? What is she, a dog?"

Timothy scoffed, "At least I'm trying."

Then, a loud splash was heard from behind Timothy. He jumped on one foot and turned to face where the splash came from. It was behind the corner, from where they came from. Jack told Timothy, "I told you, she's over there. Now calm down, she'll be okay."

Timothy rushed over to the noise and saw Olivia playing in the mud in the stream. She had her back facing him as she built little mounds of mud meant to be houses. Timothy called out to her, "Olivia! Come on and eat breakfast. You're gonna be hungry."

Olivia didn't pay him any mind. Jack got up and pulled Timothy away from Olivia. He ensured Timothy, "She'll come when she wants. I don't think you want to try and shove anything on her right now."

More splashes sounded from the corner. Then some hums as she played in the mud. Timothy picked up some of the food and brought it to a part of that corner where he could see Olivia. Jack told Timothy, "Bad idea. Just sit over here. She'll come when she wants."

Timothy told Jack, "I just want to make sure she's safe."

"She'll be fine. Now can you stop acting like she's a helpless toddler and get over here already? My bottle's getting dry."

Timothy sighed, picked up his stuff, and walked back to Jack. He set the stuff down and carefully sat down, extending his brace outward to the side of the food area. He filled up Jack's water bottle once more and ate dehydrated watermelon with him. Jack made a soured face and some small talk. "This is awful."

Timothy shrugged, "Oh well."

Timothy and Jack ate most of the overly-sweet dehydrated fruit and they agreed to give the rest to Olivia. The two sat in awkward silence as Olivia splashed in the water and mumbled to herself words the two couldn't hear.

Eventually, Olivia came back, covered in mud. Her nose was red and stuffy. Wet dirt was smeared across her face as snot dribbled out of her nose. Her hair was a mess. She laid down in

the grass a couple yards away from Timothy. Her face flushed with the grassy, muddy dirt. Timothy looked at Olivia, worried. He looked at Jack, who shook his head. Timothy looked back at Olivia. Olivia lied down there for almost a minute until she slowly got back up. She sat down next to Timothy and stared at the floor. Timothy asked, "Do you want to wash off your face?"

Olivia shook her head. Jack said, "Let me rephrase for him: Wash your face. You're not eating like that." Olivia looked at Jack and scowled. Nevertheless, she got up and washed her face in the stream. She sat back down next to Timothy. Jack tossed her a hairbrush. She brushed out her hair and set the brush down next to her. Jack clicked his tongue and snapped his fingers. "Give it back."

Timothy rolled his eyes. "And you said I treated her like a puppy."

Olivia gave back the brush quietly. Jack rinsed the brush in the stream and shook it off before shoving it in the duffle bag.

Olivia held her knees close to her chest and gently rocked herself back and forth. Olivia is quiet. Jack raised an eyebrow to this. He asked, "Hey, Olivia." She tilted her head up to face Jack. Her big, puppy eyes were dull and depressed. "What happened?" Olivia shook her head. Jack groaned. He took a breath. He told Olivia, "Just tell me. I don't wanna guess why you're sad."

Olivia croaked, "My parents are dead." Jack and Timothy sat in silence as Olivia broke down into tears again. She wailed and cried.

Timothy spoke up, "Hey, no they aren't."

"Yes they are!" Olivia screamed at Timothy.

Timothy told her, "We don't know for certain."

"Yes I do."

"Your dad is in Kenon!"

"The Kenons killed my dad!". She still pronounced Kenon incorrectly.

"We don't know that!".

Olivia stood up and started walking away, her dirtied hair swaying as she walked. Timothy stood up and chased after her. Timothy reached out for her and held her upper arm. She shook him off and started running. Jack grabbed her shoulder and gripped it. She was forced to

stop. Jack asked Olivia, “What’s with the attitude? Just yesterday you were all pepped up to see your daddy.”

Olivia started sobbing. She croaked, “You know they’re dead! You said it first!”.

Jack stood there silently, holding her shoulder. He turned his head to Timothy, who just looked back at him and Olivia, flabbergasted. Jack turned his eyes back to Olivia. She kept her head turned away from the two. Jack let go of Olivia’s shoulder. She stayed put. Jack mumbles, “I wasn’t being serious.”

Olivia turned her head so that she could see Jack from the corner of her eye. She croaked with her question, “Then why did you keep saying it?”.

Jack answered softly, “I didn’t think you’d listen.”

Olivia scoffed. “So you’re a jerk?”.

Jack looked at Timothy, who nodded. Jack looked back at Olivia and swallowed his pride. “Yes, Olivia. I’m a jerk.”

Olivia grinned, “A dumb jerk that’s freakishly tall and hasn’t seen the sun before two days ago?”.

Jack frowned. He sighed and repeated, “I’m a freakishly tall, pasty drywall white, dumb jerk.”

Olivia giggled and hopped around like a bunny. She asked with a grin, “So are my parents alive?”.

Jack shrugged, “Maybe. There’s only one way to find out.”

Olivia cheered. The group packed up their stuff. Olivia started marching to Kenon, following the stream. Jack and Timothy followed her. The sun rose high in the sky and the forest started to thin. They continued their trek, following the river as it twisted and bent. Olivia asked Timothy, “Did you save me some dried watermelon?”.

Timothy cheerily replied, “Yep! Just a second, let me get it out of my bag first.”

Timothy threw his bag onto his chest and dug through his bag. Timothy’s smile dropped. He asked, “Jack, did you eat the rest of the dried watermelon?”.

“No. That sh- stuff- is disgusting.”

“I can’t find it.”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe we just left it.”

Olivia pouted, “Aww! Could you pass me my water bottle then?”.

Timothy searched around his bag. “Are you sure you packed up your stuff, Olivia?”.

Olivia said, “I thought you already packed my stuff. It wasn’t there when I was looking for it earlier.”

Jack grumbled. “I’ll go get it. I’ll catch up with you guys.”

Jack turned around and started walking against the stream. He turned the corner and the two Ancalogites lost sight of him. Olivia and Timothy looked at each other, then back at where Jack came from. They shrugged and trusted Jack to catch up as they continued to walk along the stream. It is quiet.

From the silence, they hear a quiet, “What the fuck?”.

Beyond the thick brush, Jack rustled through the leaves, trying to find the dried watermelon and that girl's water bottle. He crept along the damp grass, his shoes getting uncomfortably moist in the stream. Then, he heard a crack of a stick. A crack that wasn't from the Ancalogites around the corner. The pasty Xancian halted his movement and breathing.

Jack noticed seven trails of human footprints. Two from when the girl left and came back in her tantrum. Two from both of the Ancalogites when they left around the bend. Two from Jack leaving and coming back. One from an outsider. He knew there were eyes on him, but only a pair. Clearly, this outsider knew less about what he was going than the Ancalogites did.

Jack followed the seventh trail of footprints with his gaze until he reached a tree. He followed up the tree until he saw a shadow. He grabbed a fistful of river rocks and aimed. He pelted the shadow with one of the rocks. The shadow yelped and fled up the tree. He aimed to throw another rock. Another yelp sounded, but quieter as he retreats. Jack called from the ground, "Kenons'll be using a lot sharper than rocks to get you down."

The shadow halted his flee. It climbed down the tree, carrying a bright red and green bag and a metal canteen in one hand. The figure walked from the cover of the trees. A person stepped out. Jack couldn't tell what to make of the person's looks. He muttered, "That is either a very ugly woman, a very pretty man, or a Galoson."

The person heard Jack and laughed a bit, revealing a voice. Jack squinted as if he didn't see the person clearly. Jack asked him, "What are you doing here?"

The person called back, "I'm just heading over to Ancalogous!"

Jack tilted his head. He replied, "Ancalogous is gone!"

The person leaned back, but he didn't seem surprised by this information. He asked, "Them too?"

Jack asked, "Where are you from?"

"Galos! Just a few miles north!". The person pointed with the pink and green bag in hand down the river.

"Galos was destroyed?"

"Oh yeah, like, last night. It was crazy! Fire everywhere. Guts everywhere. I saw my brother get stabbed through his window while I was in the forest."

Jack didn't know whether to be disturbed more by the boy's casualness or by how easily he's accepting watching his brother's death. Perhaps it was a coping mechanism, pretending like

it wasn't a big deal. But Jack couldn't help but be perturbed seeing the boy repress a grin talking about his brother. Jack huffs through his nose. "What's your name, by the way?"

"I'm Lawrence Ilano!". Its smile was back, no longer held away.

"Yes," Jack thought. "*It* is the correct pronoun for this. This *thing* isn't human. Can't be human."

Lawrence grinned cheerily as he asked back, "What's your name, by the way?"

Jack didn't like that. That it mimicked him. He gulped. "My name is.. James."

Lawrence's smile dipped ever so slightly. It quickly returned to being cheery. "Good to meet you.. James."

Lawrence looked down at the river bed. It asked, "Could you come here?"

Jack shook his head and took a step away. "No. I have to tell the others that Galos is a no-go."

He started to walk away. It uttered, "There are more."

Jack turned back, about to ask it to repeat itself, but it was gone. "What the fuck?"

Jack turned and started sprinting along the river, trying his best to get to his friends before it did. His friends? "Yes," He thought. "My friends need to be saved."

He saw Timothy and Olivia walking down the river. Jack guesses Olivia was tired from how Timothy was giving her a piggy-back ride. Jack slows down with a sigh. He catches up to his friends. "Hey."

Timothy and Olivia turned to face him. Timothy whispered a quiet "Hi," before turning back to his walking route while Olivia squealed like she hadn't seen Jack in forever.

Olivia grinned and reached for Jack to hold his cheek. He allowed this. Jack didn't mind how Olivia grinned. When she did it, it was innocent and sweet, like when a child devises their ultimate scheme to steal a cookie they didn't hear Mom said they could have. When.. *it* grinned, there was no innocence, like when a hyena finds its prey. Canines bared with evil intentions. Inhuman and wrong. Jack hoped that they, his friends, wouldn't be prey. He told the two, "Hey, guys, I couldn't get the water bottle. Something took it."

Timothy swiveled his head. "What? Did you see it?"

"If I see it again, I'll kill it."

Timothy tilted his head, "What was it?"

“A bad guy. He was from Galos. Real weird. Real creepy. Tried to get me close to him, but I wasn’t about to do that without my sidekick to fight with me.” Jack chuckled. He smoothed down the side of Timothy’s head, rubbing his ears like a pet.

Timothy grinned. “I’ll take the stab for you.”

Jack grinned. His canines bared. A hyena that found its prey. Only, Jack frowned right after thinking about it. He gritted his teeth, wanting to wear down the sharpness of them. “Don’t.”

Timothy tilted his head the other way. “Why not?”

“If it comes down to it, you two should live. I don’t have anything. You two need to keep moving.”

Timothy reminded him, “We’re going to Galos. That’s only a couple more miles North! We’ll be able to take a break in no time. Rest up, get some fighting training. I will help you.”

Jack sighed, “Err, err. Remember what I just said? There’s a Galoson in his forest. That means..” He waited for Timothy to finish his sentence for him.

Timothy put it together. “Galos is gone.”

Jack clicked his tongue and gave Jack a pointer finger. “Correct.”

Timothy looked down at the river. “That’s not good.”

Jack nodded his head. “We’re screwed.”

Olivia pouted, “But what about my parents?”

Jack and Timothy looked at each other, nonverbally arguing about who should just tell her first. Timothy sighed and started, “Olivia, you know how in Forest Scouts, you learn how to survive in the wild?”. Olivia looked at Timothy with her big, helpless eyes. She nodded her head. “Well, if you don’t know where to go, you’re in danger, and no one’s coming to look for you, where’s the best place to go?”

Olivia whispered, “To where you know you’re completely safe?”

Timothy nodded his head. “Yeah. This is one of those times.”

Olivia furrowed her brows. “But what about my parents?”

“Your parents are dead,” Jack bluntly responded.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Timothy, what about my parents?”

Timothy realized this would only work if he told her. He halted, turned around, and started walking against the stream, back towards Ancalogous. He muttered, "Your parents aren't alive on this earth anymore."

Olivia frowned. "Now *you're* in on it? You guys are so mean!"

Timothy shook his head. He felt his throat swell hearing little Alisa's voice in his head. His little sister begging him to tell the doctors they were wrong. That she won't die. He sighed and told Olivia, "No. No jokes. All the truth."

Olivia pulled her hand back, holding Timothy's head with her other hand. She threw her fist knuckle-first into his head. She shrieked, "Don't lie to me!"

Timothy remained steadfast as he continued to walk against the stream, against Olivia's wishes. Olivia pounded on his head.

Jack grabbed Olivia and pulled her off of Timothy. He threw her over his shoulder like a sack of corn as he walked next to Timothy. Olivia screamed and pounded on Jack's ribs and spine, trying to get him to fold and quit lying to her. Tears fell from her face onto the grass below. Her panicked breathing became shaky and quiet as she calmed down. She hung limp on Jack's shoulder. Timothy sighed. "Thanks, Jack."

"No problem, Tim."

Jack patted Timothy's back gently.

Olivia sniffled and rubbed her nose with her arm. She whimpered into Jack's side. She whispered, "My parents are dead?"

Jack replied, "Yes. They are dead."

Olivia continued to hang limp in his arms. Olivia asked, "Are we going home?"

Timothy sighed. "Yeah. Galos is destroyed and I don't think Kenon will be very eager for outsiders to show their faces."

Olivia gulped. "Why did they do this?"

Timothy had no answer. Jack rubbed his head and thought for a bit. "We don't know."

"Is that what you meant by 'She's in a better place', Timmy?"

Timothy turned his head away from Olivia as if she could see him. "Yeah."

Olivia turned her head up to see the river as she's carried away. She saw someone on the other side of the river. She turned to Jack and asked, "Hey, Jack, who's that?"

Jack turned his head and his eyes widened. “Don’t call me Jack. Near that thing, call me James.”

Olivia stared at the person. “Okay.”

Timothy turned his head to see what Olivia was seeing. He squinted as he audibly went, “Huh?”.

The person waved. “Hey! It’s me, Lawrence!”.

Timothy waved back with his hand to his shoulder. He watched the figure skip along the stream to meet them, though, still across the river. Lawrence grinned. Timothy felt his stomach drop.

Lawrence glared at Olivia, looking her up and down. Olivia held onto Jack’s side. Jack held Olivia tightly as he and Timothy continued to walk along the stream. Jack repositioned Olivia to be upright, holding her against the front of his body, covering her from Lawrence.

Jack kept away from eye contact with Lawrence. Lawrence looked at Jack and barfed out words, “Hey James! How’s it been? I’ve been good. Are these your friends? Your friends look tired. Do you guys need a place to stay for a bit? I got a place you can sta-.”

Jack cut him off, “No. We’re going somewhere else.”

Lawrence tilted his head. “Oh? And where is that?”.

“None of your business.”

Lawrence scratched his chin. “I see. You sure you don’t need help?”.

“Shut up and leave us alone. Go to your place and we’ll go to ours.”

Lawrence, however, followed them. Jack snapped his head to face Lawrence. “How about you step over that fucking river and fight me if you’re so desperate to piss me off.”

Lawrence starred Jack down, his smile fading. Jack halted, causing Timothy to halt. He set Olivia down and pushed her gently to Timothy. “Keep going. I’m not scared of a Galoson.”

Timothy argued, “I said I would fight with you-”.

“And I said don’t.”

“I’m sure it won’t be that hard.”

“Just go!” Jack shouted as he pointed up the stream.

Timothy sighed and took Olivia’s hand. The two walked away. Jack turned to face Lawrence, who had taken off his shoes and rolled up his jeans. Lawrence began walking through the river. He muttered, “I don’t know why you’re so against my help.”

“To be honest, you look like you’re gonna strangle me in my sleep.” Jack shrugged and took a step back. He broke off a stick and grabbed a flat, edged rock. He whittled a point into the stick while waiting for Lawrence.

“Why do you get a weapon?”

“Why don’t you grab one?”

Lawrence raised his hands. “I’m not looking for a fight.”

“Then leave us alone.”

“But then I’d be all alone. And I know I could never survive long in the wild.”

“You’ll be fine. Now,” Jack finished his makeshift skewer and pointed it at Lawrence before finishing, “I suggest you leave.”

Lawrence slowly retreated. Then, he stepped on a rock. He yelped and fell into the river, cradling his bleeding foot. Jack rolled his eyes and started walking away. Lawrence reached to him and called out, “Wait! Please help. I-. I’m gonna die out here!”. But Jack was already walking away

Jack jogged up to Timothy, who was giving Olivia a piggyback ride again. She did seem pretty tired. She was dozing off on Timothy’s back. Timothy stated, “I heard all that back there,” and stopped. Jack raised an eyebrow. “We need to help him.”

Jack scoffed and huffed. “No.”

“Jack-”.

“No, Tim. Did you look at him? Dude’s crazy!”.

“If he’s hurt, I really want to help him.”

Jack threw his hand in the air in a pseudo-slap at Timothy. “Then you help him, but I’m not letting him anywhere near Olivia.”

“We can keep him far away from Olivia and I’ll watch him sleep.”

Jack crossed his arms. “Fine.”

Jack grabbed Olivia and put her over his shoulder again. Olivia protested, groaning about how she didn’t like being treated like this. Jack set her on the floor and stood with her while Timothy went off to go help Lawrence.

Timothy gulped and put on a brave face as he walked back with the stream to Lawrence. Timothy didn’t exactly know what to do, however. He felt nervous as he saw Lawrence.

Lawrence held his foot in pain. He looked over to Timothy and called out to him, “Hey! Could you please help me?”.

Timothy nodded his head and started jogging up to Lawrence. He took a step in the river and reached out for Lawrence, who took his hand to pull himself up and out the other side of the river, holding his shoes in his other hand.

Lawrence hobbled to the side where the forest started. He wiped himself off with leaves and put back on his socks and shoes. He stood up and looked at Timothy’s leg. He asked, “What happened to you?”.

Timothy looks down to his leg and shakes the contraption Jack had built for him. Twigs and sticks braided together to keep his foot up. “Oh. That’s just to help me walk.”

Lawrence furrowed his brows. “Okay then.” Timothy watched Lawrence shuffle up to him, staring at the contraption. “Xancian.”

“What?”. Timothy tilted his head.

“That’s how Xancians make their braces. With sticks and bark.” Lawrence grabbed a green branch in the middle that Jack had put in there last. Lawrence let go of the stick and stood up. “They always put a breaker in there. A stick to break the whole contraption the instant it’s let out.”

Timothy widened his eyes and pulled his foot away from Lawrence. “Um. O-. Okay?”.

Lawrence crouched down to look at the contraption. “How savage.”

Timothy shook his head. “Look, if you’re gonna be coming with us, you gotta promise you won’t hurt any of us. Okay?”.