

The end of the world has been predicted many times, zombies, aliens, Lucifer, God, or your crush not liking you back. So as a reader of books, gamer of games and a watcher of television I thought I was totally ready for this.

Zombies? Headshot. Aliens? Band together and fight back with a few of their defectors. Lucifer? God? Call Sam and Dean Winchester. And yet out of all those ways to wipe out humanity... We got shifters.

Horrifying, flesh eating, trembling at your knees, fear inducing, Body-changing... Shifters. The only plus side is that in their natural form they rely solely on vision, because they have no ears, no nose, and their mouths are strictly for devouring humans. But I regret to advise they're pretty much always in their human form unless at night. They hunt us down during the day and eat our flesh at night.

I have a few theories about how they came into our existence. 1. aliens dropped them here and flew away. 2. An evil witch willed them into reality. 3. A virus turned a bunch of humans into cannibals that can change their forms and we now call them shifters. 4. They were among us they whole time and were just waiting to see how stupid we would get before they couldn't take it anymore. But as much as I think about it I don't actually care or at least I try not to, because it doesn't matter. They're here. We're screwed. End of story.

The sound of crunching leaves beneath my feet irritates me in a way it never did before. I've seen the same trees repeatedly to the point of hating pine. The smell of bark, sap and deer

droppings fills my lungs every morning, that's what I smell every day, aside from rain and my own malodorous self.

When all hell broke loose I started using a notebook to count the number of days going by. Now the number reads: 31. A whole month of endless forest. To be fair, I do choose to stay here because of the easy-access hiding spots. Climbing up a tree or simply crouching down next to one. I prefer to sleep in the cabins but I've also buried myself in leaves, dirt and branches to keep hidden. Desperate times.

I've begun to feel a slight decline in temperature, with the drop increasing every day. Not to mention all the leaves on the ground.

Fall.

I love the cold, I feel like a soccer mom when Starbucks is serving pumpkin spice lattes. The smells, the light breeze, the rustling leaves, never too hot, never too cold. All the bugs start to hide away so there's no bees or any other stinging insects. Or just insects in general. The colors of the leaves change! Literally no other season does that. Not to mention the cold slightly numbs my feet from the pain of constant walking.

My feet ached with every step only easing for a second as I lifted it from the ground and placed it in front of the other. My head hung and my shoulders grew numb from the weight of the backpack and assault rifle slung over my shoulder. *Numb.*

This is a very common feeling for me, except it's not my shoulder or any specific body part but rather, everything. Pain doesn't hurt, I hardly even cry anymore. I'm breathing but it feels more like I'm drowning. I'm alive, but do I want to be? I'm plagued by thoughts of guilt. *It should've been you. Why are you even still here?* Yet I keep moving.

I hadn't realized how long I'd been walking until I saw the shadows of trees growing as the light from the sun dimmed, then it was gone.

Night.

I may have forgotten to mention this, but now that night has sought us out I will reveal another reason why I stay hidden in the forest. At the very second the sun leaves, Shifters change to their true form. I'm not sure why they only change at night, I assume it has something to do with the light from the sun but I never stopped to ask one why and I never will so I'll just leave it with curiosity, but let me tell you, their true form is nothing like anyone has ever seen.

They're tall, I would guess, seven feet maybe and thin, very thin considering how much they eat. Their skin is pitch black, as if all the light has been stripped from them. Cold eyes devoid of life and filled with nothing. But their hands bother me the most, they're inordinately long and tipped with razor sharp claws that I've seen do unspeakable things. So at night, I hide.

The forest helps a lot. You're not running out in the open but you're also not trapped inside a building. I believe this forest used to be a tourist destination so I often find log cabins with bunk beds and brochures.

If I remember correctly, there's a cabin not too far from here. I don't like to stay in one place too long so I moved out of there but it'll have to do for now.

I began to pick up the pace a bit, changing from trudging to jogging. I don't worry about sound or smell, I just worry about staying hidden.

Luckily the full moon shone bright tonight. I spotted the cabin maybe 100 feet from me.

I always get nervous when night comes. I can fight off one shifter maybe even two but the thought of three or more showing up out of pure coincidence scares me straight to my core.

As I approached the cabin I raised my gun and crept towards the window, you can never be too sure. I placed the barrel of my gun on the window sill and peered through. The window was foggy and dirty, plus it was dark out but nothing was moving inside so as far as I could tell. No shifters.

Of course I was cautious when going inside, creaking the door open slowly with one hand, the other straining to hold up my rifle. I quickly shoved the door open and re-positioned myself ready to shoot. But there was nothing.

The cabin had three rooms, the main room where tourists sign in, the back room full of files and a bathroom. The back room had dead bodies though I wouldn't call them bodies anymore, they're just bone and blood now, so I didn't feel comfortable sleeping in there, not to mention *the smell*. The bathroom.... is a bathroom, I wasn't going to sleep in the bathroom. So I began unpacking my things in the main room behind the counter, my blue blanket, spare handgun, and extra ammo.

I looked around for something to use as a pillow, my eyes landed on the square, tan, frilly pillow lying on the matching sofa. The thought of sleeping on the sofa crossed my mind but the fear of a shifter seeing me decimated that thought completely. Behind the counter is the safest, cleanest bet.

I slid the handgun up next to the pillow and placed the rifle under the blanket. Sleeping without a gun next to me is impossible. I laid my tired pained head on the pillow. My once mocha colored hair now turned ebony with a paste of grease. Mud that had dried and hardened onto my skin, covered my forearms making parts of me appear dirt white when I am in fact mud brown. My fingernails looked like black claws with all the gunk I had under them.

I kicked off my shoes and pulled the blanket up to my chin. There was a blur in my vision caused by drowsy eyes and a brain refusing to stay awake any longer.

The idea of a shifter seeing me crept its way into my mind as it does every night, fear pierced my chest like daggers. I squeezed my eyes shut trying to force myself to stay calm. I saw myself dying, my head ripped from my body like meat from a chicken wing. My heart pounded.

They won't see me. They won't see me. I repeated to myself. *They hardly even come into the forest.* I tried to reason with my anxiety. *Think happy thoughts. Think happy thoughts.* I took some deep breaths and tried to chase the fear away, replacing it with my memories of before.

I thought of the happiest day of my life. August 26, 2016. My 13th birthday, the relatives too lazy to pick out an actual present, aunts, uncles, and grandparents alike gave me their hard-earned 20 dollars in visa cards.

I left the Chuck E. Cheese family get together/birthday party the second my mom gave me the okay.

"Alright you can leave now." She laughed at my eagerness to get home.

I can still hear her light-hearted chuckles, they fill the air around me fighting the fear coursing through me. Her laugh, the antidote to my constant pain. If I could just hear it one last time. My chest tightened and my eyes burned. I was too tired to cry so I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to focus on the rest of my memory.

"Thanks mom!" A smile, five miles wide appeared on me as I ran outside with the visa cards gripped tight in my hand. Under normal circumstances I would've been forced to stay but my mother knew today was very important to me. My best friend Arthur was outside with his mother in their car waiting to take me home.

Today was the day I bought and played *The Last of Us*. The number one Apocalypse video game of all time.

We pulled up to my small, quaint two-bedroom house, the lawn perfectly cut. Faded pink paint covered the outside walls with mud smudged white trim. My mother's pink roses blooming under the two large windows.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Arthur urged me forward to the front door at the side of the house.

When we got in Arthur turned on my PlayStation while I turned on my TV. I glanced around at my posters while waiting for everything to boot up.

My walls were plastered with posters but not nearly as much as they would be in the future. I had Minecraft, Marvel, Batman, and Spyro. My bed was made up of Star Wars comforters and sheets. It was a Geek Cave.

We must've played that game all night. The sun rose the next morning but we hardly noticed. At one point we were so tired we just burst into laughter (after I died in the game for maybe the hundredth time). We drank so much soda and ate so many chips our heads ached, but that was also from the entire lack of sleep.

My eyes grew heavy and my breathing slowed, my heartbeat was calm but it wasn't because I was happy, it was that At that moment.... I, no longer feared death. I feel this way every now and again. The infinite sadness, an empty feeling in my chest that I knew could only be filled by one of those I'd lost. I'll never smile or laugh again, smiling insinuates that I'm happy, I am far from happy. My chest felt like it was trying to reach out of me, to grab something. Someone, any one of the people I lost. I can't live with this heart ache any longer, but I can't let myself die either.

It's in these moments I almost *hope* a shifter sees me. To take my choice away. Force me down the hatch, push me down the slide I'm too afraid to go on. A choice, that's what this has become. My mind fades away with these lingering thoughts.

2

I drifted into consciousness slowly with a pounding headache that screamed the second I tried to sit up. I pressed my palms against the temples of my head attempting and failing to ease the pain. As I stood my legs felt just as tired as they did the day before even with the hours of rest I got. No matter how much sleep I get I'll always feel exhausted. A part of me wanted to sit down and go back to sleep, the conscious part. But it felt like someone else had control over me, telling me to get up without even listening to what I really wanted. So I began packing my things.

I winced at a sudden blinding ray of light to my eye, I cupped my hand over my right eye and stepped back, as i did i saw the golden stream in front of me the kind of light that can only be created by bouncing off another object. That object turned out to be a mirror hanging on the wall i walked over to it with

I was pulled into a hug of unfiltered warm air the second I opened the door outside. The sun directly above me, shining down on me through the opening in the trees like a disappointed mother. The low clouds, looming presence, words exchanged between an angry mother and son. The fall weather had hid itself away today. Leaving me with a sweating neck and back. The heat, only, occasionally blocked by passing clouds.

The wasn't even the slightest breeze when I began walking just dry air tucked around me.

Every now and again I fight through my facetious thoughts, to think of a plan. Something that will keep me alive. Instead of just walking in a straight line for hours every day. Like I am right now. Sleeping doesn't take away the screaming pain in my legs growing all the way up to my hips. If I were forced to run I would simply fall down. My legs would buckle in shoving my face to the dirt. I want to avoid this as much as possible.

I can't imagine staying in a forest year-round will keep my heart pumping. So now I find myself sitting at the edge of the woods by cracked pavement we humans call, a road. Having wandered very far from the cabin I slept in, wondering if I should search for the city or once again surround myself with brown and green.

I remember the most important part of survival, supplies. How much of it did I have? The answer to that question should also answer my previous question. The answer awaited me from within my backpack.

I have zero medical supplies, enough food and water for maybe four days if I starve myself and I am in desperate need of a new set of clothes but on the bright side I have plenty of ammo.

How do I still sweat with all the water I've deprived myself of? I always imagined that at some point during the post-apocalypse I would have one of those handy water cleaning things so I could drink the river water but I'm not sure at all where I would even find one of those.

I backed away from the road, I decided that I will continue on to the city but I will keep a good distance away from the road to avoid running into anyone. I've seen cars driving down this road before. The people inside were so careless I doubt they were people. Shifters, searching for prey. I trudged along making sure to still follow the road without getting too close, I considered stopping every now and then to rest my legs but my growling stomach and the fading food supplies told me to keep going.

There was a pulling in my stomach, yanking and making me think someone was punching me. It was stomach groans like these that make me want to try some deer or rabbit. Even if I had the heart to do it I wouldn't even know where I begin not to mention I haven't seen many deer at least not as many as I would imagine would be in a forest. Maybe some other more gutsy humans have begun to occupy my space of trees.

I kept looking around trying to distract myself from my famine. Eventually I slung my backpack around to the front and dug around for my notebook and a pen. My notebook, a spiral bound beauty, Had previously been occupied with writing's of an ancient language known as, *math*. I haven't Spoken this language since the day before the shifters officially took over.

I flipped through the inked pages and found one with just simple 123 numbers on it. From 1 to 31. I wrote in 32.

32 days in hell. I stared at this menacing number. How could it already be over a month? I shouldn't have been able to live this long there are people, better people, that should be alive right now. For a second, a quick wretched second, I was back to being a scared little kid, still afraid of death, crying over my mother's dead body. The smell wasn't something anyone should be able to handle but I didn't care, I laid with her, it didn't look like her but I knew it was as I had watched her die. I can still smell her decaying bones.

My shoulder scraped by a tree, waking me from my memories making me stagger to the left, my eyes never let go of the number on my paper even as I began to lose balance. I stomped my foot onto the ground to keep from tipping over as soon as I did I felt my stomach jump out of me, bees buzzed in my ears musking the cracking sound that made my heart turn sour. Ice frosted over my skin, freezing me in place. But my foot, my foot was wet. I knew the second my shoe touched the ground. I thought it was my thoughts of before that i was smelling but instead

I could see in my peripheral vision, a tan coat covered in red liquid. A deer pasted with blood and my foot shoved through it's broken bones into a pool of blood and guts. My face was wet next, before I even realized it. Tears. They dropped down onto the dead deer.

I stepped back as far as I could without removing my foot. I squeezed my eyes shut and clutched the notebook in my hands feeling the cold metal spiral in between my fingers. My foot had already sat in the body for too long, I wouldn't be able to take my foot out without taking some of the deer with me and causing a repulsive sound. In order to avoid all of this I kept my eyes sealed shut and ripped my foot out of the carcass. The sound was just a repugnant as I had imagined, suction cups of blood separating from my shoe.

I reluctantly opened my eyes and looked down at the horrid remains of what was once a beautiful creature. The way its skin was shredded everywhere as if a pack of wolves started ripping it up but instead of focusing on killing the deer, they just wanted to make it bleed.

This is NOT a finished chapter

WORK IN PROGRESS

The orange glow through the windows told me morning was here. Another night survived, I can't help but think that all those I've lost are still looking out for me. How else would I still be here? The terrible empty feeling was still present but I was grateful to be alive, no matter how many times I call to death I'm always relieved when there's no response.

My fingers slid to the right and touched the cold metal of the rifle next to me, knowing it was there made me feel safe. Bullets didn't kill Shifters but it sure as hell hurt them.

I pulled myself off the floor, easing into a standing position, a shooting pain in my lower back forced me to my knees. I winced at the inevitable pain. Sleeping on the bumpy wood floor began taking a toll on me a few weeks ago, this pain occurs every morning and lingers throughout the day. I sat, legs crossed, back straight. I used my left arm to grasp my right knee and twisted my back to the right, then the same with the left hearing several pops while doing so.

I took a deep breath and brought myself back to a standing position. I placed a hand on my back while bending down to pick up my rifle slinging it over my shoulder.

A shooting pain traveled through my spine as I waded up my blanket and shoved it, along with my handgun, into my pack. One pain among many that I've come to live with.

My body became weary at the thought of walking for at least two more days. A friend would make this trip much easier, I haven't spoken to another person in over thirty days.

I placed careful, heavy steps in front of me making my way out of the four safe walls and into the infested-by-many-things wilderness.

I took a second to take in my surroundings, trying to see or smell or hear something different. Closed my eyes and breathed in, trees.

Did you know trees have their own smells? Some are more bitter than others, some sweeter. Like different levels of a person's body odor. I smell the damp earth, my uncleansed body and feel the cool misty air on my skin, arising goosebumps.

I try to focus more on hearing, Chirping birds, rustling trees in the wind, the same wind blowing through the ragged mane I call hair. A twig snapping.... A twig snapping? My eyes shot open, instinctively pointing the rifle towards the sound.

A Deer? I thought... Hoped. *Rabbit? Human? Bird?* I ran through more possibilities. *Shifter?*

I kept my hands steady, finger off the trigger until I'm ready to shoot. I scanned the area with a focused eye but found nothing, no deer, rabbit, bird, human or shifter.

I took my right foot off the ground and gently placed it down in front of me, a few muffled crunches of leaves under my shoe. I stared out into the trees in front of me, determined to find whoever made the noise.

Out in the distance the ground moved, no, someone or something was rising from the ground in camouflage. They were maybe 300 feet ahead but they didn't seem to notice me. Their hunting rifle pointing elsewhere. They were hunting something. I crouched low to the ground in hopes of being less visible.

The person, or shifter, moved forward. Slowly walking towards whatever they were hunting. I've never seen a shifter try to camouflage themselves so odds are, this is a human but I can never be too sure. Sweat trickled down my temples while I watched the possible predator stalking his prey.

The familiar sound of crunching leaves came from another direction, straight in front of the possible shifter. I kept one eye on the hunter while I moved my gun towards the sound of the second crunching leaves, another supposed human, this one looked more like a shifter, everything was normal except the way they carried their gun, like they'd been trained. They weren't trying to be discreet or hidden. Casual clothes aside from a pair of running shoes. They stared each other down, waiting to see who would make the first move.

"Drop your weapon." The hunter spoke. A shifter would've fired already right? Maybe it's trying to trick the other one. Assuming they're both shifters, one was wearing the face of an older man, in his fifties maybe, a growing gray beard and a deep strained voice.

"You first" This one was wearing a younger girl, my age maybe. Her voice was profound, strict, assertive. She or it, showed no fear.

I tried to keep an eye on both of them, switching the barrel of my gun from him to her and back again. When my eyes and barrel landed back on the girl, her facial expression changed from calm yet focused to surprised like she just had a revelation of some sort. A loud crack echoed throughout the forest, She fired, changing positions at the same time hoping to avoid a bullet from his gun. His finger pulled the trigger a millisecond after hers.

Her bullet pierced through the hunters head and his ripped through her arm knocking her to the ground.

She seemed stunned at first, like she didn't feel the pain. I thought about going to help her but something held me in place, maybe it was the fact that she possibly killed an innocent man and I didn't want to be next or maybe it was that even if I could help her, she didn't seem to need help. She stared at the wound for a second, watching the red blood stream down her arm, I wanted to yell at her to bandage it or something.

I watched as she gathered her thoughts, she looked around for something, a pack maybe. She used both of her hands to push off the ground which I suspect she instantly regretted when she let out a cry and grabbed her left wounded arm, she had finally realized how much pain she was in.

She began to panic when she saw how much blood her right hand was holding. She grabbed her gun off the floor and sprinted off to my right. My first instinct was to chase after her but I knew that was a bad idea, she was clearly human but the hunter also appeared to be human.

Unfortunately in this world Shifters aren't the only beings you need to be afraid of. Just another reason why I've been alone this whole time.

After she was out of sight I slung my gun over my shoulder and walked over to the...Man? She killed. I didn't want to waste my rifle bullets just in case so I reached inside my pack for my spare gun, my Beretta.

I raised my gun towards the body as I slowly approached. It's face hid behind a tree, I closed my eyes, took a breath then made sure the safety was off on my gun. I took one swift step placing myself in front of the body and immediately knew... shifter.

Shifters bleed dark green blood, the only way to be sure if you're dealing with a human or not. I looked to his arm, he had a knife wound there, he must've been tending to it when the girl found him. That's how she knew he wasn't human.

A gunshot can't kill a shifter, even to the head. They can't regenerate in human form so he won't be back until dark. I'm safe for now but even seeing the shifter here means that they're officially switching from hunting in the cities to hunting in the forest as I suspected they might. Just another reason I need to get out of this forest.

I thought about grabbing his hunting rifle but the weight of three guns seemed like it would be too much so I began walking back to the place I had slept.

I'll pick up the speed and try to get out of this forest a day earlier, find a small house and settle down until the place becomes unsafe.

But maybe I shouldn't? That girl back there really seemed to know how to handle herself, maybe I should try to stick with her. It would be dangerous to stay in the forest, but after what happened the last time I left I'm not sure which of my options is best. What do I have to lose, if she doesn't shoot me maybe we could even become friends?

My heart ached at the thought of a friend. Someone to talk to, bore with my idiotic thoughts, or simply pour my pain and guilt out to. I winced when thinking about being alone, like the pain from solitary was more boundless than having your skin and flesh ripped apart.

The hunger was contemporary, forever here and never to leave. But eating never crossed my mind, the growls in my stomach simply felt like an uncomfortable inconvenience.

Eat or you'll die, you idiot, I had to remind myself of the consequence of starving myself. I thought about what food I had in my backpack. Granola bars, Nature Valley bars, Hershey's chocolate almond bars. S'mores pop tarts and brown sugar pop tarts.

It's still morning so it would only be proper that I eat a pop tart. However, time doesn't really matter anymore, so breakfast doesn't matter.

I slid my pack off my shoulder and into my hands, unzipping it and grabbing the Chocolate almond bar it bent easily in my hand, I held it carefully waiting for it to drop to the ground in mush. Carefully unwrapping the bar getting melted chocolate on the tips of my fingers.

I should've gone with the pop tart. My best bet was to just lick the wrapper clean of chocolate and crunch on almonds along the way. I reminded myself of a five year old discovering chocolate ice cream on a cone for the first time. My face was covered, though to be fair, it was and still is already covered with mud, dirt and scraps.

The gentle wind blew a strange scent into my nose, making it twinge uncomfortably. I glanced around trying to find the source, when my eyes fell upon rising white smoke in the near distance. Someone's campfire, perhaps the girl from before. Or a shifter, though I rarely see shifters making campfires.

I planned to approach the camp with caution, stuffing the chocolate wrapper in my back pocket and raising my rifle. I winced as twigs snapped under my feet, hoping no jumps out and kills me. I saw the pile of logs that used to be burning, it was doused a few minutes ago.

The crunch under my feet sounded different, louder, I lifted my foot and found a crushed soda can. I realized there were crushed cans and granola bar wrappers scattered across the ground. Then I saw the bandages, bloody bandages, the blood was red. Holes in the ground told me that whoever was here has a tent. Fire, tent, they're beacons to your location. If this wasn't a shifter then they must not be inclined to hide themselves like I am.

I wouldn't consider it brave to be so negligent about keeping safe. I spotted footprints in the dirt, broken twigs, and crunched leaves and drops of blood. A trail. Should I follow it? If it's the girl from before then without a doubt, yes. But there's still a chance a shifter made this camp, wait. No, Shifters eat humans not soda and granola bars and the biggest giveaway of all, the red blood bandages. It could be a trick to lure people in but I think I'm willing to take that chance, what's the worst that could happen I lose someone else? I've got nothing to lose.

I trudged forward in the direction the trail led, keeping my eyes on the floor making sure I don't take a wrong turn and lose the trail.

Now far away from the camp my tired limbs warned me to stop, take a break, So I did. The trail would be there even if I wasn't following it. I slid my pack off and tossed it next to a tree, I let my rifle fall to the ground. The wood scratched my back as I slid against the tree to the ground. My index finger found its way to the tip of my nose, I found myself staring at my rifle, remembering the day it was given to be.

"You remember the rules?" My dad twisted from the driver's seat looking back at me. I twiddled my thumbs and thought back to what my dad had just told me, while he shifted the truck into park in the middle of the desert.

"Yup!" I gave a firm nod, assuring him that I remembered but he wasn't so easily assured.

"Okay then, repeat them back to me." He tested.

"Rule number one: the gun is always loaded, even when you've checked a thousand times, treat the gun like it's always loaded. Number 2: Don't point the gun at anything your not willing to shoot. Number 3: Keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot. Triggers can be sensitive." I recited what my father had said earlier.

The memory playing in my head stopped suddenly when I felt my heart tugging at me. Tears hung in my eyes as I stared even longer at the gun. My parents believed in heaven, they believed when you died you got to see all your loved ones who had previously died. What if I could see them right now, what if they want me to see them. They could be waiting for me.

No. Stay strong.

"This, son, is an ar-15. You will not be shooting it today, maybe in a few years when you're older but today I will teach you to shoot the m9 Beretta. Many people don't like this gun, but personally I love it." My dad glanced back and forth from loading the handgun then to me then back at the gun. He walked away and I followed.

"Alright, Stand here." I stood facing old ripped up armchairs and planks of wood. *"Hold the gun like this"* His dominant hand was higher up on the grip with the trigger finger lying

along the top side, his other hand holding the bottom of the gun. He then placed the gun in my hands, I adjusted my hands the way he showed me and stretched my arms out.

“Lean into the gun. Hold it as tight as you can and squeeze the trigger. ”

I readied myself to shoot.

“Wait! Wait wait wait.” He spoke with urgency. I heard him run back to the car and grab something. *“I forgot the headphones. We were about to lose our eardrums.”* he placed the heavy headphones snug on my head and did the same to his.

“Okay, Shoot!” he shouted loudly but he still sounded a mile away.

I held the gun as tightly as I could and squeezed

BANG

My arms flung up but I quickly brought them back down. The sound echoed throughout the desert. I thought for a split second about whether or not this was legal and squeezed again.

BANG

Arms went up then down again

BANG

And again.

“Keep leaning into the gun.” He placed a hand on my back to keep me steady.

BANG

BANG BANG BANG

My head jolted forward. Those were real gunshots.

I scrambled to grab my gun pulling it close to my chest. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on where the shots were coming from.

BANG

I whipped around, my left knee plunged into the dirt. My heart banged against my chest. The trees blurred. My breath hitched. The gun, heavy on my shaking arms.

This is it. There'll be too many. I can't do it. I can't win. I began taking in large breath's. My stomach felt a constant pain.

Steady. Focus. Breathe. In, out, in, out.

I swallowed my fear and gripped my gun tighter, I clenched my jaw and held my breath. Then let out an exasperated exhale.

My head cleared of anxious thoughts, I eased up. Focusing. Thinking. Plotting.

There's another human here so my chances of survival are both better and worse. The human could turn on me, or think I'm a shifter. Or the person wasn't able to kill the shifter so now they're dead and I should probably run.

But I didn't, I continued forward. It's funny how quick someone can go from shaking scared to risking your life brave, stupid.

No leaves crunched under my shoe as my foot only slightly left the ground not leaving enough room for twigs and leaves to give away my position.

Inch by inch. Step by step. I could hear muffled movements ahead of me but I kept my quiet pace. The barrel of my gun scanning the trees and the ground for bodies. two. It found two bodies leaking dark green blood. Then another, this one wasn't dead. Or comatose.

It appeared to be the girl from before on her knees, breathing heavy with blood leaking from a badly bandaged arm. I scanned my surroundings one last time determining that it was just me and her.

I swung the gun around my shoulder and walked carelessly towards her. I stopped and found myself struggling to say anything. My voice had been vacant for so long I wondered if it even still worked.

"Hello." I croaked, cringing at my pronunciation of such a simple word but that was instantly the last thing on my mind, her arm swung up with a handgun pulling the trigger the second our eyes met.

Her bullet whizzed past my ear like a deadly whisper and collided with a tree right next to me making kindling fly. Then she fell forward to the ground, probably passed out.

I stood wide-eyed, absent-minded. Two inches to the left and I'd be dead. The feeling of shock passed quickly, ultimately leaving me unfazed by the situation.

She's lost too much blood, I need to help her. I let my gear fall off my shoulders and went to the backpacks she had next to her. Rummaging through the items in her pack I found only one more bandage and some Hydrogen peroxide. I sighed, materials were limited in a forest.

I lifted her from laying on her face to laying on her back, knelt down beside her, my knees have known this dirt longer than I've known her. Blood gushed through the bandage as I lifted her arm to check for an exit wound, I exhaled in relief when I saw one. I cautiously peeled

back the bandage, red blood covered my fingers the second I did, it's a miracle she's survived this long. I anxiously tapped my index finger against her arm, looking to the new bandage then back at the wound. My dark eyebrows furrowed in frustration along with a quick exhale.

We'll need more bandages soon and proper cleaning supplies. But this will do for now. I used the old bandage to squeeze the wound hoping to stop the blood or at least slow it down.

My skinny arms grew tired quickly and I let go. There was blood flow but it was slow enough for now. I tossed the old blood soaked bandage away and unwrapped the new one. First I used the hydrogen peroxide to clean the wound, it festered and bubbled from the cleaning agent. Then I added the bandage, Carefully placing it around her arm, smoothing it out from one end to the other.

Judging from the amount of blood loss I suspect another thirty minutes of unconsciousness. I would wait here but the comatose Shifters give off an unwelcoming, daunting demeanor. I could practically see them rising from the ground to kill me and then some. But leaving her here would bring almost certain death. I don't think I can handle letting another person die on my watch even if I don't know them, what could I lose, my life? It's not worth much at this point. So I'll wait. Maybe attempt to take a nap to pass the time though falling asleep is doubtful.

When she awoke I was resting at a nearby tree. I had tried to pass the time by reloading her gun, eating a granola bar and eventually just staring off into space trying not to let my mind fall into chaotic oblivion.

She slowly blinked awake, her breath hitching when she tried to sit up causing her to grab her arm, she probably forgot she was shot, maybe thinking it was a dream. But like most terrible things, it was not a dream.

I again fought with myself to say something, it would be creepy if she turned around to find me staring at her.

“How are-” she whipped around before I could finish, an appropriate reaction. I could see in her eyes that she wasn’t scared just curious, suspicious. She was plotting, reassessing her surroundings and deciding what I am. I could imagine her thoughts would be the same as mine.

If he was a shifter I’d be dead. They don’t play with their food so this is no trick or manipulation. I couldn’t know what she was thinking beyond that.

“Good.” she responded. Her voice is hoarse and unused as mine was. “Alive.” She restated.

“Thank you.” She said, I’m glad she’s thankful, though it could be an act. I’m not sure I would be thankful. I scratched nervously at the inside of my forearm. I wasn’t good with people even before but now, well, I don’t have any people skills at all.

“Oh, it was nothing, it’s not like I was busy or anything.” I tittered at my own joke, you know, because I’m a comedian. That’s why she stared at me like I was stupid. “Uh, I’m Dmitri.” I tried to recover.

“River.”

Once again the shadows of trees reached for the sky, the faint sight of stars teased the night sky. River's arm was doing better but she was in a lot of pain, we had no antibiotics or painkillers. Every now and then I'll look over to find the familiar face of someone trying to stifle their tears. We hardly talked, probably just awkward because, you know, what would I say? "So, the end of the world, how are you liking it so far?"

I can't imagine anyone being happy in this world, or wanting to talk about how much they don't like it. I'm sure at some point I'll come up with something stupid to either make her run away or laugh at me.

"We should stop and rest soon, there's probably a cabin nearby. There usually is." I suggested.

"No, we... need to keep... moving." she said in a sharp whisper. We swapped packs a while ago, her big camping pack was too much for her arm.

"It's almost dark, if we look now we can get a cabin before that. We both could use some sleep." I attempted to reason with her.

"Do you always hunker down when it gets dark?" I was taken off guard by how quickly she spoke, stopped in her tracks and stared at me with a facial expression I've never seen before. A mixture of pain, confusion, and frustration.

"Yeah, isn't that what everyone does, your chances of running into a shifter are much higher if you keep walking." I continued my argument on why we should find a cabin. I mean it *is* the smarter decision, right?

"No. If you stay still they-" she paused for a second, closing her eyes, taking a deep breath and placing a gentle hand around her arm, her voice croaked and shook.

“They’ll find you easier if you stay still. Besides, if you were hunting a human where’s the first place you would check? Cabin.” Her argument was slightly better than mine, Slightly. Then it truly is a wonder I survived this long.. She looked to the ground for a second, choosing her next words.

“Shifters.” She said with slight amusement. “That’s a good name for them.” She turned back to continue walking but I had one last trick up my sleeve.

“You need to rest or you’ll pass out from the pain.” I said with sure confidence. It’s true, we should’ve stopped hours ago but we also need medicine from the city, so she pushed through the pain. I can’t imagine she will be able to suffer much longer.

She clenched the fist of her wounded arm causing blood to stream through the bandage. She turned her head back to me with one very clear expression, anger. Her stare, so deadly you I don’t know hardly anything about this girl but right now I think it’s safe to assume she has some anger issues, or she’s not used to people arguing with her. Either way with dark creeping towards us and her scare-the-soul-out-of-you stare, I’m pretty terrified.

Her expression morphed from angry to exhausted her eyes hung, her shoulders slouched. She became a saggy potato sack.

“I can take-” she tried to mumble before losing all strength and collapsing to the ground. I cursed under my breath. Hopefully she was wrong about us staying still. It’s all we can do for now. I loosened my shoulders to let the pack and rifle fall off but quickly tightened back up, sitting around without a gun on me at all times is not an option. Instead I held my gun out while the pack fell to the ground, though it was so large it wasn’t far from the ground to begin with.

To keep it more secure I strapped my rifle across both of my shoulders instead of just letting it hang off one. Then went over to River and tried my best to fix her arm.

Holding the wound closed for as long as possible trying to stop the bleeding, this resulted in blood covering my hands like deep red paint. I am thankful that she's not awake to feel this, I would hate to do this to someone if they could feel the pain.

On a normal day I would be having a panic attack, another life is left in my care and it's my job not to screw it up. But I was calm, I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing I could do. She got herself shot by being reckless, she was lucky I was there the first time she passed out and she's lucky now. I just hope we can make it back to the city before her heart beat makes like the sun and disappears.

I slowly let go of her arm hoping that any red I see is old and dry. It's hard to tell with how much red has covered it but I think I am successful.

Her expression is calm yet daunting, devoid of the melancholy mask she wears every second while awake. For the few hours I've known her I've seen nothing but pain and anger. Now she is, as most are when they're asleep, *peaceful*. Beneath the scruffs of dirt are pale features, speckles of brown across her cheeks. Her hair was sunset orange topped with yellow streaks and a distasteful amount of mud. Imagine if you threw all the dirt the earth held at the sun masking its true beauty.

Antithesis to my olive complexion, we only shared the speckles of brown across our cheeks and of course the muddy hair and dirt masked skin. I searched her packing looking for her pillow and blankets. I found one fluffy, comfortable looking, sorta-white pillow and a large thick gray blanket.

If I had known about the end of the world I would've packed a larger bag. But alas I am without a working brain so I will sleep with my thin blue blanket using my arm as a pillow. I lay her head smoothly onto the pillow, grabbed my pack from her arms and threw the blanket on top.

From my pack I grabbed my blanket and handgun, using the pack as a pillow I curled up by the closest tree, my rifle pressed against my chest, the handgun tucked under my pack.

I expected to be afraid, to have another panic attack like every other night, but now I felt nothing but desolation. The world now was a shade of gray on contrary to the colorful world of before. All you can do is drown in your sorrow with no hope of escape, this eventually leads you to the complete emptiness that I feel now.

Only fractions of my memories are left. Dreams that drift father with every sleep. The light your life once had, slowly dims like the sun only to leave you entirely, but unlike the sun you are never sure if this light will ever return to you.

My brain struggled to make sense of the sounds around me but I was able to make out, “Dmitri. Dmitri wake up.” River. Probably. Who am I kidding? Anyone else who knew my name is dead, of course it’s River. Her voice was faint, I couldn’t tell if she was whispering. Or if I’m dreaming.

I clenched and unclenched my hands trying to bring feeling back, forcing myself to wake up. Then bringing them to my eyes and rubbing, I inhaled sharply and opened my eyes to find River looking down at me. Her face lit only by the night stars and moon, my eyes came into focus on her mud brown pair of irises.

“Oh good you’re finally awake.” she said in a low voice with a tinge of annoyance but mostly relief she didn’t meet my eyes when she spoke, instead she stared at something behind me. I parted my mouth to apologize but hesitated when a much more disturbing sound made its way to my ears. A foot shuffling through dirt, coming from behind me. I scooted up and pushed my back up against the tree, hugging the rifle.

River held her handgun, ready to shoot if the creature makes any wrong move. I couldn’t take the anxious feeling of not knowing what was going on behind me so I leaned forward and peered around the tree trunk corner.

Through the darkness I found the outline of one tall, thin shifter. I would guess 250 feet away from us. We sit there hoping it doesn’t take an unexpected turn and find us. I trained my eyes on it, anticipating a wrong turn. Telling myself to move the second it looks in our direction. The tips of my fingers raising myself slightly into the air, slowly turning everything but my head in the opposite direction of where I face.

My focus is broken by a thin gasp and a hand shoving me back to the tree, then tugging my arm around the corner of the tree, I scoot along the edge of the tree, the shifter is now to my right. I hear a foot step directly behind me, not a shuffle or the crunching of leaves, a large foot step. Rivers eyes now laced with fear as she crouches in front of me, a gentle hand placed on my chest holding me still. My arms went up with goosebumps knowing the creature was so close.

I turned my head ever so slightly just to glimpse the shifter. My heart turned cold, and my head went dizzy. The intense fear filled the freezing forest around us. Terror induced tears gathered in my eyes. I always felt the fear before the bravery, it's instinct when you're faced with something so much stronger than you. Something you don't understand. Then you have to remind yourself of the deadly weapons you hold in your hands.

The fear turns to bravery, courage, or cockiness, I can never tell the difference. But this time, maybe it was how tired I was or that whatever light was left in my heart had disappeared, I felt no bravery, courage, or cockiness. I was just scared, terrified. Petrified. I thought to myself, *would it really be so bad if it saw us?*

How would it affect anything? It wouldn't. I'd simply be gone. There's no one left to cry for me.

For a second I thought someone was punching my chest, but it was my heart. Beating. Deciding. *Do I want to live? Should I just, Leave.?*

The shifter, now too far for me to make any impulse decisions, crept forward, scanning its surroundings for prey. Failing to see the very willing prey right behind it.

The other shifter was out of sight at this point, in daylight I might've been able to see it but then again shifters don't show their true form in the daylight. They probably just sunburn easy.

River stared blankly at where the shifter once walked, anticipating its return. I couldn't tell if she was disappointed or relieved that it didn't.

"That was close." River broke the icy silence that surrounded us. I couldn't reply, I just gazed out in front of me. Peering into the darkness so far, for so long. The infinite night gawked back at me. A canyon of desolation consumed me. Owls were the only living creatures making any noise other than the two of us.

"You feel it too don't you? The emptiness." she spoke between the rustling leaves and hooting owls drawing me out of my dark void. As my senses dialed back to reality I thought about her question. The emptiness.

"Yes. it's constant." I couldn't look in the eyes, I only turned my head in her direction. I heard her release a heavy breath. We both fell silent. Contemplating what to say next, whether the strangely uncomfortable subject should be changed or if we should elaborate on our feelings. If we changed the subject now there's a chance we'll never come back to it, replacing our dreadful aching feelings with comedy and complaints.

"We need to move. It's too cold out here and I need new bandages." she avoided the subject we had gotten ourselves into, the predictable choice. I faced my inevitable reality of having to live at least one more day with this pain in my chest. As I slowly stood up from the ground, I saw that like me the sun had faced its reality of having to rise once more, shining light onto our dark world.

When I felt the sun's low warmth I realized how cold it was, my nose had gone completely numb along with the tips of my fingers. It's a mystery I was even able to sleep through the cold. I typically wake up when it gets this bad. Ever since the shifters began tearing everyone apart I've found it really hard to stay asleep on a normal night, let alone a cold one.

"Alright." I slipped my handgun into the buckle of my pants and the rifle over my shoulder then the big camping pack. "Let's go."

River held her left arm in place against her stomach and used her right arm to lift my pack and sling it over her shoulder.

"Hey." I looked at her with curious eyes.

"What?" she asked, looking back at me with the eyes of someone preparing themselves to be annoyed.

"Why did you stick with me? You seem like the loner type and in movies whenever someone comes across another person they're always mean and try to leave immediately. But you haven't tried to leave once." This question occurred to me just a few seconds ago when I realized she could've easily left me there to die.

"Maybe it's because I'm not a movie character and I know that surviving is always easier when you're not alone." She said. A thin smile teased happiness.

Feet are aching, brain is shutting down. More sleep. I should've gotten more sleep before moving again. My eyelids begging to meet again. My thoughts come through like a bad fax

machine. I just need one lazy day. Just one day when all I do is sleep instead of walk. But then the cold would steal my life away.

I don't think the city is too far now anyways. River and I found the road a while ago so I predict maybe two more hours of forest. I think my eyes can handle staring at the same exact trees for two more hours.

River looked more exhausted than I did, and yet I didn't hear her complain once. I feel like a child in a store getting ready to throw a fit because he wants to go home so bad.

While River trudges forward like a soldier determined to lead their people back to camp after a long war. Like her arm isn't about to start bleeding again. I wish I had packed bandages. I have band-aids. But nothing to cover that big of a wound.

"Does it hurt?" I ask. Keeping my voice low, I don't even want the birds to hear our conversation. Sunlight, as I've mentioned before, means that we can no longer trust the humans surrounding us. Shifters with working human ears are not the shifters I want to come into contact with anytime soon.

"Yeah. like a heartbeat in my arm. But there's nothing I can do about it, so I choose not to worry. Unlike you. You worry a lot don't you?" she raised an eyebrow at me.

"yeah I guess I've been known to overthink things."

"Good. People used to tell me I make very impulsive decisions. So maybe we can meet a happy medium." Another thin smile ran across her lips. I don't know her well enough to decide whether or not it's fake but I truly hope it's real.

The road. The dark, striped, untrodden, dirtless beauty. Oh how I've longed to stare at this very road. The road to the convenient store, where there are bandages and rotisserie hot dogs.

I tapped my foot on the ground, hearing the solid sound of shoe colliding with pavement. I let out a light chuckle of relief. Through old memories I saw all the cars that had once passed on this road, wearing it down until it required a group of men and machines to come and fix it.

Seems like a metaphor for my current life, minus the men and machines. The cars being death and me, the road. I'm sure I'll find a way to deal with everything eventually or maybe I won't have to. If I were to die today I wouldn't have to worry about anything anymore. I thought about that a lot but I decided if I wanted to keep living I need to push those thoughts out, so I did. Replacing every heart hanging bad thought with a funny joke.

"Do you think maybe we could get into nasa and use one of the rocket ships to fly away?" I asked mostly as a joke but also with genuine curiosity. This is actually a question I've thought a lot about over this past month. And I've come to the conclusion that even if one of us could fly a rocket ship we would have nowhere to go because we can't survive on another planet. It sure would be nice to get off of this planet though.

"Yeah, wouldn't that be great, but then we would be incredibly bored because our bodies wouldn't constantly be at risk of being torn apart." she said. Our laughs fill the empty, dead void around us.

Chilly wind swept through us as we started walking down the road to the store in the direction marked by the old signs along the road.

You may be thinking there's graffiti all over the signs and everything else but actually contrary to popular hollywood movie belief, nobody immediately starts to graffiti everything the

second our government officials are ripped apart, instead the people run, then they also get ripped apart but there's No graffitiing.

Instead everything is plain, but not boring. It's beautiful even. It's not incredibly unique or out of this world, it's calming. I suspect in a few years vegetation will begin to take over the walls and roads, and abandoned cars, which are not all stuck on the highway believe or not.

A lot of people sped through the desert. Instead of going straight to the highway and following traffic laws they just turned right and drove off into the desert. Considering how long it took the shifters to search the forests I wouldn't doubt it if there were still some people living out in the dirt. As long as they happened to have some food and water handy they would be just fine.