

THE BLUE

DAWN

CHENUTHI LEHANSA MABOPITIYA

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(The Author as usual)

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MAHAMAYA GILS' COLLEGE KANDY

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Dedication

Before this journey begins, I would like to thank the people who helped make it possible. To my mom and dad, thank you for always believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting every dream I dared to chase. Your love and sacrifices have given me opportunities I will always be grateful for. To my grandmother, thank you for your endless love, wisdom, and kindness. Your support has been a constant source of strength throughout my life. To my school, thank you for giving me the incredible opportunity to write and publish this book. Without this chance, *The Blue Dawn* might have remained only an idea in my imagination. This book is proof that opportunities can turn dreams into reality. To my class teacher, thank you for your guidance, patience, and dedication. Your encouragement throughout my journey as a student has meant more than words can express. To my friends, thank you for being the light in my life. The characters within these pages were inspired by the friendships I treasure most. While these characters are fictional, the kindness, laughter, courage, loyalty, and unforgettable memories behind them came from real people who made my life brighter every day. You inspired not only the characters in this story but also the person writing it. A special thank you to the friend who inspired Tara. Just as Tara became one of the most important characters in this story, your friendship became one of the most important inspirations behind it. This novel was also inspired by the many science-fiction stories, alien movies, adventures, mysteries, and imaginative worlds I have loved throughout my life. Every film I watched, every story I experienced, and every adventure I imagined left behind a small spark that eventually became *The Blue Dawn*. And finally, to you, the reader, thank you for opening this book. Inside these pages are friendships, courage, sacrifice, hope, loss, blue butterflies, and memories that refuse to fade. So hold on tight. Look toward the horizon. And if you ever see a glowing blue butterfly drifting across the evening sky, remember that every great adventure begins with a single moment. Welcome to *The Blue Dawn*. This journey now belongs to you.



Foreword

In an increasingly complex global future, the "Hemamala Upahara" book project, led by Mahamaya Girls' College, stands as a turning point in girls' education. Over a decade, it has successfully nurtured thousands of children to become young authors.

This year, by collaborating with other schools, we aimed to provide students with a wealth of new experiences. The goal was to develop multi-faceted skills, including communication, values, and creative growth. As a result, children have written books that pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic—the supreme symbol of the Buddhist world—to the Hill Country (Kandy).

I extend my gratitude to everyone involved, including the students who contributed their creativity and the teachers who guided them.

Shashikala Senadhira
Principal
Mahamaya Girls' College

Congratulatory Message

It is a great honor for me, as the Governor of the Central Province, to send a congratulatory message for the launch of the books created through the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project initiated by Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy.

Education is the fundamental foundation for the progress of society, and it is further strengthened through books and literary creations. It is clearly commendable that students' talents, creativity, and intellectual abilities are emerging through projects such as this.

I believe that this book creation project will provide valuable knowledge and a precious literary contribution not only to the students but to the entire society. Furthermore, I hope that through such efforts, future writers who will bring pride to Sri Lanka will emerge.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation and blessings to the Principal, the academic staff, the students, and everyone involved who dedicated themselves to this successful endeavor. I wish this project and the book launch ceremony great success.

Sarath B.S. Abeykoon

Governor, Central Province

Emeritus Professor, University of Peradeniya

2026-05-10

Congratulatory Message

I highly appreciate the noble and outstanding effort of the Principal and the academic staff of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, the student daughters, the students of other participating schools, and everyone who dedicated themselves to plan and implement this book publication project. The project was organized under the leadership of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, with the participation of other schools in the Kandy Zone, with the aim of encouraging children toward book creation within the current school system, as a tribute to Hemamala Kumariya who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic to Sri Lanka.

For several decades, Sri Lanka has been committed to providing free, compulsory, quality, and equitable education to all children, thereby producing a future generation of intelligent and skilled citizens. In such a context, this book creation program for school children helps develop creative ability, critical thinking, and other positive qualities for a balanced and well-rounded personality, and contributes to building a future knowledge-based society.

May all activities of the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project be successful through the blessings of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Pradeep Nilanga Dela

Diyawadana Nilame,

Sri Dalada Maligawa.

2026.05.10.

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THE CALM BEFORE THE WINGS

Located among rolling hills and vast forests, **Elysian Academy** was one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country.

The academy stood within the **Highcrest Education District**, a region created specifically for education. Several boarding schools, colleges, and research institutions were spread throughout the district, making it a place where thousands of students lived and studied far from home.

Most students at Elysian Academy came from cities hundreds of kilometers away. They lived in dormitories during the school term and only returned home during major holidays.

At the center of the district stood **Highcrest Central Station**, a large railway station connecting the area to the rest of the country. Every week, trains arrived carrying students, parents, teachers, and supplies. The station was considered the heart of the district.

A small town surrounded the station, filled with cafés, bookstores, convenience stores, restaurants, medical facilities, and staff residences. Students often visited the town on weekends.

Several schools were located throughout the district, including:

Elysian Academy

Rosehaven Academy

Northwind Academy

Evergreen Academy

Starlake Academy

Ravencrest Academy

Although each school had its own campus, students regularly met during competitions, festivals, sporting events, and academic programs.

The district was known for being peaceful and safe. Parents trusted it. Teachers admired it. Students often complained about being far from home, but most eventually grew to love it.

What nobody realized was that the district's greatest strength—its isolation—would one day become its greatest weakness.

When transportation systems began failing and the railway lines shut down, thousands of students found themselves trapped far away from their families.

Including Lyra, Sandi, Tara, Demi, and Viv.

And beyond the forests surrounding the district, something unknown was beginning to stir.

The afternoon sun streamed through the classroom windows, illuminating pages filled with notes, equations, and highlighted textbooks. With midterms only weeks away, Grade 12-B was unusually quiet. The scratching of pens against paper and the occasional turning of pages were the only sounds breaking the silence.

Even after the final bell rang, many students remained at their desks, determined to finish assignments or review one last chapter before heading back to the dormitories. Slowly, conversations began to replace the silence as books were closed and bags were packed.

Lyra stretched her arms above her head.

"I think if I have to solve one more math problem today, my brain is actually going to explode."

That's because you spend more time on the basketball court than studying," Tara teased.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

Demi laughed from across the room.

Before Lyra could respond, a voice cut through the conversation.

"If you spent half as much time studying as you do arguing, your grades would improve significantly."

Everyone turned.

Giselle Hart sat at the front of the classroom, barely looking up from the enormous textbook resting on her desk. Her glasses reflected the afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows.

Tara rolled her eyes.

"See? This is why nobody asks for your opinion."

"I wasn't giving an opinion," Giselle replied calmly. "I was stating a fact."

Without another word, she returned to highlighting her notes.

"Does she ever stop studying?" Demi whispered.

"I don't think she sleeps," Sandi answered.

Across the room, Olivia Reed laughed.

"I saw her reading during lunch."

Giselle looked up.

"It was productive."

"See?" Olivia said. "Exactly my point."

The class burst into laughter.

Meanwhile, Valentina Cruz was staring into a small mirror.

"No."

"What?" Viv asked.

Valentina pointed dramatically at her reflection.

"This humidity is ruining my hair."

Noah Bennett immediately leaned over.

"Truly devastating."

"Thank you."

"I was being sarcastic."

"And I chose to ignore it."

The class laughed again.

Near the window, Mira Lawson quietly sketched in her notebook, occasionally glancing outside as she added details to a drawing.

Aiden sat beside her, reviewing science notes despite school having ended ten minutes ago.

Kai Mercer was already scrolling through his phone.

"You all need to see this."

Nobody paid attention.

Kai raised his voice.

"I said, you all need to see this."

That got their attention.

Several students gathered around his desk.

"What now?" Ethan asked.

Kai turned his screen around.

"The student forum."

Noah groaned.

"The place where rumors go to reproduce?"

Kai ignored him.

"Someone posted that Ravencrest Academy's basketball team challenged Elysian to a rematch."

Lyra immediately perked up.

"Really?"

"Apparently."

Tara grinned.

"Oh, we're winning this time."

"Confident."

"We should be."

"You said that last time."

"We don't talk about last time."

The group laughed.

Outside, the afternoon sun cast long golden shadows across the campus grounds. Students from nearby classrooms were already spilling into the hallways, eager to enjoy the rest of the day.

For a moment, everything felt perfectly ordinary.

Exams.

Sports.

Friendships.

The endless routine of boarding school life.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

"Basketball court?" Lyra asked, grabbing her bag.

"Obviously," Tara replied.

The five friends began heading toward the door.

Viv waved at Olivia.

"You coming?"

Olivia smiled.

"In a minute. I promised I'd help Aiden with something."

"Have fun being responsible."

"I always do."

As they left, Noah called after them.

"Try not to embarrass yourselves."

"No promises," Demi replied.

The classroom slowly emptied.

Giselle remained at her desk, studying.

Mira continued sketching.

Valentina continued fixing her hair.

Kai continued scrolling.

And beyond the classroom windows, the evening sun illuminated the beautiful grounds of Elysian Academy.

Just another normal day.

The kind of day nobody bothers remembering.

Until it becomes impossible to forget.

As Olivia went to help Aiden the group went to the basketball court

Lyra dribbled the ball down the court, her ponytail swaying behind her as she laughed. "Catch me if you can!"

"Not a chance!" Tara shouted, sprinting after her.

Lyra leaped and sent the ball flying toward the hoop.

Swish.

The ball dropped cleanly through the net.

"Oh, come on!" Demi groaned dramatically. "At this point, we should just hand her the championship trophy."

The group burst into laughter.

Nearby, Viv caught the ball and spun it on her fingertip before passing it to Sandi.

"You know," Viv said with a grin, "when exams are over, the first thing I'm doing is eating the biggest sandwich I can find."

"Same!" Sandi replied, dribbling between her legs. "We've been talking about those sandwiches for months."

"And fries," Tara added quickly.

"Definitely fries," Lyra agreed.

The game continued, full of missed shots, lucky baskets, and endless teasing. Every time someone missed the hoop, the others cheered louder than if they had actually scored.

The sky slowly shifted from bright blue to shades of orange and pink. A cool breeze drifted through the court, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass from the nearby field.

For a moment, everything felt perfect.

No exams.

No worries.

Just five friends racing across the court, laughing until their stomachs hurt.

As the ball bounced across the pavement once more, Lyra glanced at the sky.

"Promise me something," she said.

The others paused.

"No matter where we end up after school, let's stay friends."

A smile spread across Tara's face.

"Deal."

One by one, the others agreed.

Then Viv grabbed the ball and ran toward the hoop.

"Last basket wins!"

"HEY!" Demi shouted as everyone took off after her.

Their laughter echoed across the quiet school grounds as the sun slipped lower behind the buildings, painting the court in gold.

None of them knew that these ordinary afternoons—the games, the jokes, the dreams, and the promises—would soon become memories they would desperately wish they could relive.

WINGS OF BLUE

Inside Grade 12 B Tara was trying to convince Dami that she had absolutely not cheated during yesterday's basketball game

"I saw you step over the line."

"I did not."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"You did."

Before the argument could continue Noah suddenly appeared beside their desks.

“You two have been discussing this for 20 minutes”

“It's important”

“It really isn't” A few students nearby laughed.

At the front of the classroom, Giselle Hart continued studying with three textbooks spread across her desk, completely ignoring the conversation.

Meanwhile, Valentina was showing Olivia a pair of shoes she wanted to buy online.

"They're gorgeous."

"They cost more than my monthly allowance."

"Exactly."

Near the window, Mira quietly sketched while Aiden reviewed science notes.

Everything felt perfectly normal.

Then something blue fluttered past the glass.

Nobody paid much attention.

By lunchtime, however, students had begun noticing more of them.

One drifted through an open classroom door.

Another landed on a dormitory railing.

Several could be seen floating above the sports field.

Most people simply thought they were butterflies.

Pretty butterflies.

Nothing more.

"Hey."

Viv pointed toward a nearby tree.

"Those weren't here yesterday."

A small cluster of blue butterflies rested among the branches.

Lyra looked up.

"Oh."

For a moment, the group watched them.

Then Tara immediately returned to complaining about an upcoming exam.

The conversation moved on.

Nobody thought much of it.

Why would they?

Life at Elysian Academy was still the same classes, assignments, sports, and endless exam preparation.

The butterflies simply became another part of the scenery Had someone noticed It they might have remembered that moment later.

The butterflies remained there for a nearly an hour before finally taking flight and disappearing into the school gardens at the same time, It seemed completely ordinary Elysian Academy students. However, at their home it was different across their hometowns the people began noticing thousands of unusual blue butterflies which the Elysian Academy students also saw They appeared in cities forest and parks All at the same time people took photographs and share the videos online. News channels cover the phenomenon continuously, and scientists rush to study the insects many belie they were simply a rare species that has somehow appeared unexpectedly.

However, the loved ones of Elysian Academy students in their home towns Also believed that it was just a coincidence. As the days passed, People began noticing strange silver lights hovering the sky

above. Unlike stars, planes, or drones these lights remained motionless for hours. They could be seen from almost everywhere in the country, especially at night. As usual Most people accepted the Scientists explanations dismissing them as some unusual atmospheric phenomenon, so does the life continued. Schools remained open, Students focused on the exam studies while the butterflies became a normal site in everyday life.

More Than Butterflies

As the foreign blue butterflies becomes everyone's topic and as days flew by so did the blue visitors increased and beside that the people of cities, the people in the students hometowns , their parents the whole public started to notice something that the students didn't get to notice . At first, the stories were brushed aside—a coincidence, a trick of summer fatigue—but slowly, more families noticed something was off.

Around the same time, people began noticing strange silver lights in the sky.

At first there were only a few.

Small and distant, they appeared near the horizon after sunset and remained motionless throughout the night. Scientists offered explanations ranging from unusual atmospheric conditions to rare astronomical phenomena.

But as the weeks passed, more lights appeared.

What had once been a handful became dozens.

Then hundreds.

Photographs spread across social media showing the same lights hanging over cities, forests, and coastlines around the world. Some people became fascinated by them. Others felt uneasy whenever they looked up and saw them watching from above.

Parents began keeping children inside after dusk, watching the sky but never telling them why. The government released a brief bulletin:

"Scientists are investigating isolated reports of fatigue and memory loss; no cause has been confirmed. The aerial lights are also being monitored. At this time, there is no evidence of danger to the public."

Most people accepted the explanation.

Others didn't.

However, the bulletin never reached the academy, and no one told the students. Their parents kept it quiet—not because they were hiding a danger, but because there seemed to be nothing to fear. The butterflies had never harmed anyone, and the lights remained distant in the sky. To most people, it was simply another unexplained phenomenon that scientists would eventually figure so, life continued as normal, and the students remained unaware of the growing rumours spreading through their hometowns.

That evening, the dormitories buzzed with conversation.

In Dorm 3, Lyra sat on her bed while Tara leaned against the window Viv on the bunk bed, the three of them talking to their parents on separate calls.

"They're saying the butterflies are all over the country now," Lyra's mother said through the phone. "The government is monitoring the situation, but the scientists don't think it's dangerous."

"See?" Tara's mother agreed from her own call. "Nothing to worry about. Just stay focused on your studies and stay safe."

Tara rolled her eyes.

"That's literally what every adult keeps saying."

A few minutes later, all the calls ended.

"So apparently we're supposed to ignore the giant mystery happening outside," Viv said.

Lyra laughed.

"Pretty much."

Meanwhile, in another dormitory, Sandi sat cross-legged on her bed while Demi and Olivia scrolled through photos of the butterflies online.

"They're kind of pretty," Olivia admitted.

"Kind of?" Demi said. "They're everywhere. My entire feed is butterflies."

Sandi looked up from her notebook.

"My parents said the government is keeping an eye on it."

"Everyone's keeping an eye on it," Olivia replied.

Outside their window, several blue butterflies drifted through the evening air.

For a moment, the three girls watched them in silence.

Then Demi shrugged.

"Well, unless they start doing homework for me, I don't really care."

The room erupted into laughter.

Outside, beneath the darkening sky, the blue butterflies continued to flutter through the grounds of Elysian Academy still the girls been unaware of the strange lights hovering above the sky .

WHISPERS OF THE BLUE

As the butterflies spread across the country, strange stories began appearing online.

Most people dismissed them as rumors.

At first, they were harmless.

A teenager claimed he had followed a cluster of butterflies into a wooded area near his town and somehow arrived home after dark with no memory of where he had been for nearly four hours.

People laughed it off.

Then similar stories started appearing.

A woman in a neighbouring city reported becoming separated from her friends while hiking after noticing a swarm of blue butterflies deeper in the forest. She was found the next morning sitting beside a stream nearly ten kilometers away.

She remembered entering the forest.

She remembered seeing the butterflies.

She remembered hearing something.

After that, nothing.

There were no signs of injury.

No signs of a struggle.

Just missing time.

Soon, message boards filled with similar accounts.

Most were impossible to verify.

Others were quickly removed.

The government urged people not to spread misinformation and stated that scientists were investigating several reports of unusual fatigue and temporary memory loss.

Still, the rumours continued.

One story in particular refused to disappear.

According to local reports, a father had gone searching for his missing dog after seeing butterflies gathering near the edge of a forest.

He returned two days later.

When asked where he had been, he simply stared at the question.

Then he asked why everyone looked so worried.

To him, only a few minutes had passed.

The story spread rapidly online before eventually disappearing.

Some claimed it had been fabricated.

Others insisted it was true.

No one knew for certain.

What unsettled people most was not that individuals occasionally went missing.

It was that those who returned could never explain what had happened.

They all remembered the butterflies.

And then they remembered nothing at all.

Meanwhile, above the world, the silver lights continued to multiply. Unlike other rumours this one didn't fail to reach the students ears soon, through their exams the whole school were talking about the lost people.

The conversation started during lunch.

"I saw something weird online last night," Noah said, dropping into his seat.

"That's how every terrible story begins," Demi replied.

"I'm serious."

Several students looked up.

Noah lowered his voice dramatically.

"Apparently some guy followed the blue butterflies into a forest and forgot an entire day."

Tara immediately burst out laughing.

"No way."

"I'm serious."

"So am I," Tara said. "That's the dumbest thing I've heard all week."

A few students laughed.

Across the table, Olivia frowned.

"Actually, I've seen that rumor too."

"See?" Noah said.

"There are dozens of stories like that online."

Viv looked uncertain.

"My parents mentioned something about people getting lost."

Sandi nodded.

"My cousin heard about it too."

Tara rolled her eyes.

"You all realize people get lost in forests without magical butterflies helping them, right?"

"Maybe," Olivia said.

"But it's a little strange."

"No, it's a little ridiculous."

Noah pointed at her.

"That's exactly what people in horror movies say before disappearing."

The table erupted into laughter.

"If I see those butterflies again," Tara declared dramatically, "I'll follow them myself."

"Please don't," Viv said immediately.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll probably get lost."

Tara grinned.

"Then I'll become a legendary mystery."

"You'd become a missing person report."

"Close enough."

Even Lyra laughed.

At the front of the room, Giselle finally looked up from her textbook.

"The probability of mass memory loss caused by butterflies is effectively zero."

"Thank you," Tara said.

"Finally, someone with common sense."

"I'm not agreeing with you."

"Too late."

Giselle sighed and returned to studying.

Nearby, Valentina glanced up from her phone.

"I still think the lights are weirder than the butterflies."

"Those are weird too," Tara replied.

"Everything's weird."

Outside the cafeteria windows, dozens of blue butterflies drifted above the sports field.

For a brief moment, Lyra found herself watching them.

The butterflies moved together almost like they were following an invisible path.

Then Tara tossed a french fry at Noah.

The conversation immediately shifted back to basketball, exams, and weekend plans.

And just like that, the rumors were forgotten.

At least for now.

A week later, Tara got her chance. Classes had ended early, and most students had already returned to their dormitories. As she walked back from the gym, she noticed a cluster of blue butterflies drifting beyond the academy's nature trail. Immediately, she laughed. The rumors came rushing back—people getting lost, people forgetting things, people following butterflies into forests. "Well, this is perfect," she muttered, unable to resist. Without a second thought, she followed them.

The butterflies moved deeper among the trees, their blue wings flickering between patches of sunlight. At first, Tara found the entire thing amusing. Nothing strange happened. No mysterious voices. No terrifying creatures. Just butterflies. She was already planning how she would tell everyone the rumors were nonsense.

Then a breeze swept through the forest.

Hundreds of butterflies suddenly rose into the air around her, surrounding her in a swirl of shimmering blue. Tara stopped. For a brief moment, the air felt strangely warm. Not hot. Not cold. Just different. One butterfly drifted close and hovered near her shoulder. Its wings opened and closed slowly, releasing a faint shimmer of blue dust that vanished almost immediately into the air.

Tara frowned.

"Okay... that's a little weird."

The sensation lasted only a second before disappearing.

Ahead, dozens more butterflies gathered above a small clearing. Their wings reflected the sunlight like tiny fragments of glass. Mesmerized, Tara stepped forward.

The forest had gone silent.

No birds.

No insects.

No wind.

Only the butterflies.

Then, somewhere beyond the trees, a faint silver light flickered.

Tara blinked.

The butterflies exploded into the air all at once.

Blue wings filled her vision.

A flash of silver appeared between the branches.

And then—

Nothing.

The next thing Tara remembered was standing near the academy gate.

The sky had turned orange with sunset.

Her phone showed sixteen missed messages.

More than three hours had passed.

Confused, she stared at the screen.

"How...?"

She couldn't remember leaving the forest. She couldn't remember walking back. In fact, she couldn't remember anything after seeing the silver light. Far away, hidden beneath her hair at the base of her neck, a faint blue pattern briefly appeared beneath her skin. It glowed once. Then vanished. Tara never noticed.

By the time Tara finally reached the dormitory common room, Lyra, Viv, Demi, Sandi, and Olivia were already waiting for her. "There you are!" Demi exclaimed. "Do you know how many messages we've sent you?" Tara blinked. "What?" "You disappeared for three hours," Viv said. "We thought you got lost." For a moment, Tara simply stared at them. Lost? The word felt strangely unfamiliar. Then she laughed. "Oh. Right." The group exchanged glances. "You, okay?" Lyra asked. "Of course, I am." Tara dropped her bag onto a nearby chair. "I just went for a walk." "A three-hour walk?" Olivia asked. "Apparently." Something about her smile felt wrong. Not scary. Just... distant. As though part of her attention was somewhere else. "What do you even remember?" Sandi asked. Tara opened her mouth. Then paused. The answer should have been simple. She remembered the butterflies. The forest. The silver light. After that... Nothing. A strange headache pulsed behind her eyes. "I don't know." The room fell silent. "You don't know?" Viv repeated. Tara rubbed her forehead. For a brief second, irritation flashed across her face. "I said I don't know." The sharpness in her voice surprised everyone. Including Tara herself. She immediately looked away. "Sorry." That wasn't like her. Usually, Tara was the loudest person in the room. The first to joke. The first to laugh. Now she seemed distracted. Almost absent. Lyra frowned. "Maybe you should visit the nurse." "I'm fine." The answer came too quickly. Too firmly. Again, everyone exchanged glances. Trying to lighten the mood, Demi grinned. "So..." She nudged Tara making fun of the so-called rumours trying to make everyone including Tara laugh. "Did the magical butterflies erase your memory?" Normally Tara would have laughed. Instead, she went completely still. For a second, her eyes drifted toward the darkening window. Outside, several blue butterflies floated through the evening air. Tara stared at them. Watching. Almost mesmerized. "Tara?" She blinked. "What?" Demi lowered her smile. "You were staring." "Oh." Tara looked away. "Sorry." An uncomfortable silence settled over the group their gazes meeting each other again realisation hitting, the brushed off rumours making sense. Nobody could explain it. Nothing about Tara looked different. She sounded the same. She looked the same. And yet something felt... wrong. As if the person sitting in front of them had

returned from the forest, but not entirely. Outside, unnoticed by anyone in the room, a single blue butterfly landed briefly on the dormitory windowsill. Then it took flight and disappeared into the gathering darkness. 'I ... I didn't study for the upcoming exam I should go study' she said finally breaking the odd silence turning away from the dorm she leaned against the door facing back "uhm I might be late you guys can switch off the lights in the dorms" and with that she left.

Tara sat in the quiet library long after most people had left, the overhead lights humming softly as the rows of books seemed to press in around her. Her notes were spread across the table, but she couldn't focus—every few minutes, strange flashes flickered at the edge of her vision, like brief bursts of blue light that vanished the moment she tried to look at them properly. She blinked hard, trying to push through it, but the unease only grew heavier in her chest.

She shifted in her seat, pulling her collar slightly away from her neck as a restless discomfort crept over her skin. Without thinking much about it, her fingers moved up to scratch lightly at her neck, a nervous habit more than anything else, before she forced her hand back down to the page. The words blurred together. Tara exhaled slowly, trying to steady herself, telling herself she just needed to finish one more page—just one more—while the quiet library seemed to stretch on endlessly around her but the flashes came again, sharper this time, staining the edges of everything in cold blue before vanishing.

Viv was sitting on the edge of her shared bunk bed with Lyra staring at Tara's now empty bed while Lyra leaned against the bedframe leaning her back against it, she sighs, and breaking the silence Viv spoke looking over at Lyra "Do you think something has changed... like properly changed?" Lyra didn't answer right away she looked down at Viv. "Since the butterflies appeared?" she asked quietly. Viv nodded. "Yeah. Since then. Everything feels... off. Like it started small, and now it's just getting worse. And the rumours I think they are serious something is happening lyra .. out there .. something we are not sure of " A faint pause settled between them. "Yeah, something we are not sure of" Lyra repeated "and the so-called butterfly thingy I think it does make sense like ugh I don't know" lyra signed "it's just a mess" Lyra ran a hand through her hair. Viv's voice was almost a whisper as she speaks "I know right it's like tara was acting so weird Viv's voice was almost a whisper as she's not even here yet I don't think she's studying in the library but I don't want go and disturb her either and all of a sudden the rumours actually starting to since don't you think?" Lyra nodded, her jaw tight "Wait... Viv .. The rumours remember? Tara didn't believe in them do you think she followed the butterflies or something and the memory loss thingy happened? But when we asked her about those butterflies she just stared and she didn't reply" Viv Bit her lip, nodding slowly " Yeah and if something's, I we will figure it out together We always have" Viv gave her a small, worried smile. "You know, you're the closest to Tara. Maybe you could talk to her—just ask if she remembers anything about today ?" Lyra sighed, looking down at the floor. "I'll try. I just hope whatever's going on, we can stop it before it gets worse." Lyra patted the edge of her bed and said, "Viv, you want to come up? Tara's still not back. Let's just sleep up here together, like we used to. "Viv nodded, pulling herself up carefully, and they lay side by side, the old familiarity easing some of the weight between them. They kept their eyes on the dark ceiling, holding onto the quiet hope that, somehow, Tara would show up and then they drift into sleep, like they did in the junior school, holding on to that small hope

The First Impact

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, a strange phenomenon unfolded. Thousands of blue butterflies, which had been a quiet presence in the sky for weeks, suddenly surged upward, as if drawn by some unseen force. People stopped in their tracks, pointing skyward as tiny pinpricks of light appeared in their midst. At first, the lights one looked like stars, glowing with a pale blue hue. People everywhere noticed them—on social media, news outlets began showing the sky, and families gathered to see. Scientists said it was likely a rare atmospheric event, but the government stayed quiet, offering no explanation. Still, people felt uneasy. They kept watching the sky, wondering what the lights meant. Then, on a random Tuesday afternoon, one of the blue lights suddenly plummeted to earth, crashing near a military base on the outskirts of town. The impact shook the ground. Within minutes, soldiers were dispatched to investigate. The crash site lay in the middle of a scorched clearing. A pale blue sphere of light rested inside the crater, pulsing softly like a heartbeat. Captain Reyes led the first team forward.

"Stay alert."

The soldiers formed a perimeter around the object. At first, nothing happened. The light simply sat there, silent and waiting. The blue glow brightened, and a low humming sound filled the air. Suddenly, cracks of darkness spread through the sphere. The spheres. They were not lights they were spheres. Something moved inside. The first creature emerged moments later. It was small, smooth, and legless. Its body twisted through the air with unnatural speed, as if it were swimming through invisible water.

Then another appeared. And another. And another.

Within seconds, dozens of them poured from the shattered sphere. The soldiers opened fire immediately. The creatures scattered in every direction. Some vanished into the surrounding trees, while others rushed the perimeter. A dark tendril lashed through the air, striking a soldier before anyone could react.

He vanished into the confusion as the line broke apart.

"CONTACT!"

Gunfire erupted across the clearing. More creatures poured from the shattered sphere. They moved like living shadows, twisting and darting between the soldiers. Every time a flashlight beam found one, it was already somewhere else. Another tendril flashed through the darkness. A scream echoed across the crater. The creatures weren't attacking randomly.

They seemed to be hunting. Working together. Flanking positions. Separating groups. Several soldiers opened fire on a creature racing toward them. The bullets finally brought it down, its body collapsing into a motionless heap. But for every creature that fell, another seemed to emerge from the smoke.

"Fall back!"

The order came too late. The perimeter had already collapsed. Radio chatter filled the night. Panicked voices. Calls for reinforcements. Requests for evacuation. Above it all, the strange blue sphere continued pulsing inside the crater. As if watching. As if learning. The battle lasted less than ten minutes. When reinforcements finally arrived, the clearing was almost silent. The surviving soldiers stood shaken among the wreckage, staring into the surrounding forest. Many of the creatures had been destroyed. Several had escaped. As soldiers secured the crater, nobody noticed the movement at the edge of the forest. Several surviving creatures remained hidden among the shadows. Motionless. Watching. One by one, they slipped silently between the trees. A flashlight beam swept across the area a second too late. The forest was empty again. Within moments, the creatures had disappeared into the darkness beyond the military perimeter. And for the first time, they were no longer contained.

Two days passed since the attack, yet the government kept it from the public letting them live under the new blue spheres. Spheres they had no idea about. It was just before dawn when the first call came. A woman found her neighbour lying motionless on the sidewalk, drained of color, as if every spark of life had been stolen. Later, more reports came—men, women, and children found pale and limp in their own homes, as if something had drained them from within. Soldiers arrived, sweeping the streets. Near an old park, a soldier froze. In the distance, a pale shimmer caught his flashlight. As the team approached, they saw the creatures—small, translucent, rippling in a ghostly blue, still clinging to lifeless bodies. They moved like ink in water, tendrils flaring, as if siphoning something unseen. Without hesitation, soldiers opened fire. Flash after flash, the small creatures dissolved into vapor, leaving only faint blue shimmer in the air. By the time dawn broke, the government could no longer keep the attack secret. That evening, a national emergency broadcast rang out: the president announced a full lockdown. “Citizens must stay inside. These small creatures drain life. We still do not know their origin.” As a nationwide curfew took effect, every town fell silent. Streets emptied, businesses closed, and families locked their doors, waiting for answers that never came. The government still didn’t understand what the creatures were—only that the threat was real, and the night was just beginning.

The Truth in Their Wings

That evening, deep inside the military research facility, the team gathered around a cold steel table, the captured creature in a containment tube. Unlike the small, hand-sized forms they’d seen before, this one had swelled to the size of a fist. Its tendrils pulsed faintly inside the bluish glow, still leaving behind that faint shimmer in the air. Captain Reyes watched, as Dr. Chen snapped a picture of one of the blue butterflies perched nearby—its wings, once dismissed as ordinary, now looked eerily mechanical, almost artificial. As they compared the photos, a chilling realization crept in—the butterflies and the creature shared identical patterns, an alien code hidden in their wings. This was no natural species—it was a bridge, a foreign life form using the butterflies as its heralds. Captain Reyes leaned over the containment tube, his brow furrowed. "So, Dr. Chen, are you saying this creature is connected to those butterflies?"

Dr. Chen nodded slowly, adjusting the microscope. "Exactly. The patterns in its tendrils mirror the wing veins of the butterflies—like a genetic blueprint. This is no coincidence."

Reyes ran a hand over his face. "We thought it was just an anomaly. But if this is alien, why didn't we detect it earlier?"

Dr. Chen pointed at the screen. "Look at this photo—see the butterfly wings? Each ridge aligns with the creature's tendrils. This is an invasive species, Captain—it's using the butterflies as a signal, like a beacon."

Reyes exhaled sharply. "Then we need to tell command. This is bigger than we thought."

Dr. Chen nodded. "We'll run more tests. But the public needs to know—we just have to prepare them for what's coming."

As Dr. Chen adjusted the microscope, the blue butterflies began appearing again, drifting upward, one by one, into the night sky. It was a blue moon evening, the air heavy with anticipation. Slowly, the butterflies ascended, spiraling inside the pale blue lights until they formed a perfect sphere, suspended above them. In that eerie glow, the creature inside the tube pulsed faintly, matching the rhythm of the lights. Reyes felt a chill as the entire lab seemed to hum with a strange energy. Outside, under the blue moon, the butterflies continued their ascent, and for the first time, everyone realized—they were no longer just observers. As the creature's pulse synchronized with the glowing sphere, Captain Reyes spoke, his voice low. "Dr. Chen, the butterflies... they're the ones creating these spheres. They're guiding something—maybe a portal, maybe a signal."

Dr. Chen nodded, pressing a gloved hand to the tube. "Exactly. We can't ignore this. Whatever they are, they're using the butterflies as a beacon to cross over."

Reyes's jaw tightened. "Then we need a full lockdown. No one leaves the base. And we warn the public—carefully. This is bigger than we imagined."

Outside, the blue moon shone brighter, and the butterflies circled, as if waiting for their next move. And now, everyone realized—care was no longer optional. It was the only thing keeping them safe.

Unspoken Truths

“Good evening. We are issuing an urgent public safety advisory. After thorough investigation, scientists have determined that the recent phenomena—the blue butterflies and the lights—are linked to an unknown alien species. We do not fully understand their intent, but evidence suggests they are using the butterflies as a signal. We must be cautious. To all citizens: stay inside your homes after dark, keep all doors and windows locked, and avoid going outside unless absolutely necessary. The military will be sent to ensure safety in affected towns. This is a precaution, and while we understand the fear, we emphasize that this is still under investigation. Please remain calm, and follow official instructions. We will share more details as soon as we can. Your safety is our priority.”

As the news reached the students of Elysian Academy students huddled in small groups, phones in hand, their faces pale. Lyra heard her mother’s voice shake as she said, “Honey, stay inside. They’re saying people have been harmed.” Viv sat beside Olivia, both of them listening as their parents echoed the same plea: don’t go out, don’t engage. Noah stood by the window, his dad’s voice firm but scared, “Stay inside; we don’t understand this yet.” Ethan, Kai, and the others nodded silently, feeling the confusion turn to cold certainty—this was no longer just a strange phenomenon. Something real, something terrifying, was closing in.

In the weeks that followed, life slowly returned to normal.

The government kept several restrictions in place, and occasional lockdowns were announced in areas where sightings had been reported. Military patrols remained visible in many towns, but the panic that had once gripped the country gradually faded. According to official reports, the remaining creatures had been eliminated. The military claimed that every known specimen had been located and destroyed, and no new attacks were reported. People wanted to believe it. The government’s warnings remained in place, and news channels frequently reminded citizens to report anything unusual. Scientists continued their investigations, but few answers were shared with the public. The government continued to urge caution, but without new incidents, many people began paying less attention to the warnings. No one claimed the threat was over. No one claimed the country was completely safe. But after weeks without attacks, fear slowly gave way to routine. Life moved on. Or at least, it tried to. Because somewhere beyond the sight of the public, scientists, soldiers, and government officials were still searching for answers. And the questions they couldn’t answer were far more frightening than the ones they could.

Noah and Kai stepped into the convenience shop in a quiet abandoned city near their school locked down for a while it has become dull , the bell tinkling as they picked up snacks. As they leaned over the counter, a small blue shape flickered behind the shelf. It floated there, smooth and

glossy, like liquid light. Kai grinned, poking fun. "Dude, it tickles when it brushes against me—like, what is this, a party toy?" he questioned himself not knowing what it actually was. He reached out again, and as his finger brushed the creature's smooth surface, its head a strange shiver ran up his arm. He laughed at first, but then the creature darted forward. The tendrils flickered, and suddenly it lunged. Kai froze. "No—no way!" Noah shouted, and as Kai stumbled back, the alien's mouth opened wide, tendrils flailing. They scrambled, pushing it aside, and by sheer panic, shoved it into the freezer. The door slammed. Noah and Kai stumbled out of the convenience store, their hearts raced, adrenaline still pumping from the close call. "Weirdest thing ever," Noah muttered, rubbing his arm. Kai glanced back at the shop, still feeling the weight of that cold ripple on his skin. "Weird? It was more than weird—I swear, it moved by itself." They walked in silence toward the parking lot. They didn't dare tell anyone, not yet, but the fear lingered, heavy. As Noah and Kai walked in silence along the empty street back toward the academy, the weight of what they'd seen kept them frozen in their thoughts. Noah kept glancing over his shoulder, as if expecting the creature to follow them. Noah nodded, feeling the weight of the secret pressing down in their silence. They walked back toward the academy, Kai kept glancing at his phone, scrolling through headlines. Noah noticed and leaned over. "What are you looking at?" Kai tapped the screen, pulling up a series of posts: "Unexplained sightings in town," "Eyewitness accounts of small blue creatures," and "Scientists call it an alien species." Noah's stomach twisted. "It's real." Kai nodded slowly, still reading. "They said the military found one—but no one talked about it until now." Noah frowned, his voice tight. "We have to tell someone." Kai shook his head. "Not yet. Let's just keep this between us until we know more." The two walked on, the weight of what they'd found pressing down on them, as a faint blue glow flickered far above in the sky.

And they knew—this wasn't a joke

The main hall of Elysian Academy buzzed with nervous energy.

Students filled every row of seats, some whispering, some checking notes for no reason other than stress. At the front of the hall, stacks of mock examination papers sat neatly on a table.

"This is it," Noah Whitmore groaned. "My funeral."

"You say that every time," Olivia Sterling replied.

"And one day I'll be right."

"You've been saying that since Year 9," Ethan Blackwood added.

Kai Bennett laughed. "Honestly, if Noah actually studied instead of complaining—"

"Traitor."

Before Kai could reply, Mrs. Perera stepped onto the stage.

The hall immediately quieted.

"Good morning, students. We will now be distributing your mock examination results."

Several students looked ready to faint.

Mrs. Perera adjusted her glasses.

"The highest results will be announced first."

The tension instantly doubled.

"First place: Lyra Ashford."

Applause erupted throughout the hall.

Lyra blinked in surprise.

Viv Hart rolled her eyes playfully.

"Of course it's Lyra."

"I actually thought I messed up chemistry," Lyra admitted.

"You got ninety-seven," Olivia said.

"That's messed up?"

The girls laughed.

Mrs. Perera continued.

"Second place: Giselle."

A few students immediately turned around.

Giselle pushed her glasses up.

"What did you get?" Ethan asked.

"Not enough."

"You got second place."

"I lost three marks."

"You're impossible."

Even Mrs. Perera looked amused.

"Third place: Olivia Sterling."

Olivia accepted her paper with a grin.

"Not bad."

"Not bad?" Noah exclaimed. "I would sell my soul for those marks."

More laughter spread through the hall.

"Fourth place: Viv Hart."

Viv immediately raised both hands in victory.

"I'd like to thank my supporters."

"You mean Google?" Kai asked.

The hall erupted again.

As more names were called, excitement filled the room.

"Ethan Blackwood."

"Let's go!"

"Kai Bennett."

"YES!"

"Noah Whitmore."

Noah grabbed his paper dramatically.

"I survived."

"Barely," Ethan whispered.

Valentina sat nearby, elegantly crossing her legs as she accepted her results.

"How did you do?" Sophia asked.

Valentina smiled.

"Well enough."

"You definitely know your score."

"Of course I do."

Charlotte Winters laughed.

"She's known since the papers left the exam room."

For a few minutes, the hall felt completely normal.

Students compared grades.

Friends teased each other.

Plans for the weekend were discussed.

For the first time in months, the alien attacks, lockdowns, and military checkpoints felt far away.

Then the hall doors opened.

The conversations stopped.

Several military officers entered.

Behind them walked Principal Eleanor Hartwell.

The atmosphere changed instantly.

Students exchanged confused glances.

Even the teachers looked uneasy.

Principal Hartwell stepped onto the stage.

Her expression was serious.

Far more serious than anyone had ever seen before.

"Students."

The room fell silent.

"I would first like to congratulate you on your examination results."

Nobody responded.

Everyone was focused on the military officers standing behind her.

The principal took a slow breath.

"As you know, our country continues to face a national emergency."

Immediately the room grew tense.

The alien incidents had become less frequent, but lockdowns still occurred across the country.

Military vehicles could still be seen in many towns.

No one had forgotten.

"This morning," Principal Hartwell continued, "the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defence issued a new directive. "Noah frowned. "I don't like where this is going." Neither did anyone else. "Beginning next term, all final-year students across the country will be required to participate in the National Service Programme." The hall exploded. "What?!""Required?""You're joking!""No way!" The principal raised her hand. The noise slowly faded. "This programme is compulsory." The room became even quieter. One student stood up. "What if we refuse?" Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Principal Hartwell answered calmly. "Students who do not complete the programme will not be eligible for university placement or government higher education opportunities." The hall erupted louder than before. "No way!""That's insane!""They can't do that!" Kai stared at the stage. "You've got to be kidding." Beside him, Noah looked equally stunned. "They actually can." Even Giselle looked shaken. Valentina's confident smile had completely disappeared. Principal Hartwell waited for the noise to settle. "The programme will include emergency response training, survival training, public safety operations, and support duties during periods of national lockdown." The military officers remained silent. Watching. "The government believes that every citizen has a role to play in protecting the country during this crisis." Noah leaned toward Ethan. "This sounds a lot more military than they're pretending." Ethan nodded. "Definitely." Outside the tall windows of the hall, a handful of blue butterflies drifted through the sky. Almost nobody noticed them. Almost. Lyra's eyes followed them for a moment. A strange feeling settled in her chest. The attacks may have stopped. Life may have become normal again. But somehow, looking at those butterflies, she couldn't shake the feeling that the real story was only beginning.

The next morning, the students filed into the classroom, still shaken by the news from the night before. Then, just as the bell rang, Captain Reyes walked in, his face drawn, his uniform stiff. "Listen up," he said, his voice steady but heavy. "Due to recent events, all of you have been called for mandatory military service. It's required for university admissions. You'll receive details by the end of the day." A murmur rippled through the class. Valentina's hand instinctively went to her throat, her voice a whisper. "Mandatory? But why us?" Captain Reyes met her gaze, his expression sombre. "Because the situation is more serious than we thought. Stay close to home, stay safe." As the class sat in stunned silence, a news alert chimed on their screens: a citywide lockdown was now in effect. Communications were limited, and everyone was ordered to remain indoors. For the first time in their lives, the students felt like their world was shrinking beyond control. Absolutely! Here's how that scene could unfold:

The school field stretched wide under the afternoon sun as Captain Reyes paced in front of them, barking out orders. The students, sweating under their gear, dragged sandbags and climbed ropes, the physical toll obvious on their faces. Giselle kept adjusting her glasses as she stumbled over a hurdle. "This is pointless!" she gasped. "I only signed up to pass university admissions!" Valentina wiped her brow, nodding in agreement. "Exactly. I didn't think we'd be running like this." Meanwhile, Noah and Kai ran side by side, their conversation low. "I still can't believe it," Noah muttered. Kai nodded, glancing briefly at him. "We don't talk about it, remember? Just keep going." As the group dragged themselves toward the next drill, Lyra slowed, watching Tara push through a final lap. After the whistle blew, Lyra jogged over, catching Tara's arm lightly. "You know, you really do seem better today." Tara smiled faintly, but her eyes held a distant look. "Yeah, I think I am. It's just... weird." And as they stood there, the drills fading behind them, none of them could shake the feeling that something was still off, lurking just out of sight.

The Last Ordinary Days

After week of training, The afternoon sun hung low over the field as the students formed lines, their rifles strapped tight to their sides. Captain Reyes stood at the front, his voice calm but steady. "All right, everyone, it's all about muscle memory. You need to unfold your weapons in seconds." They clicked and snapped the rifles open, a sharp series of metallic clicks. As Kai pulled his gun apart and reassembled it, Noah grinned. "Man, you're getting fast." Kai laughed, catching his eye. "I guess we're a team now—no matter what comes next." On the other side, Giselle wiped her forehead, turning to Valentina. "You know, this is harder than I expected, but at least we have each other." Valentina smiled faintly. "Yeah, we're not alone in this." Captain Reyes clapped his hands, drawing their attention. "This isn't just training. It's survival. I know you're all strong. Stay close, trust each other, and we'll get through this." And as the sun dipped lower, the bond between them grew stronger, forged in sweat, trust, and the looming shadow of what they couldn't name yet.

The training grounds were already sweltering by the time the students arrived.

Rows of folding military rifles rested on tables beneath a large canopy. Targets had been set up across the shooting range, and several military instructors stood nearby, watching silently.

The moment the students saw the obstacle course behind the range, groans erupted.

"Nope," Noah Whitmore said immediately. "I'm going home."

"You live here," Ethan Blackwood replied.

"Then I'm going to my dorm."

"You live there too."

Kai Bennett laughed.

"You're doomed."

Captain Reyes stepped forward.

"Good morning, recruits."

The students answered with a weak chorus.

"Good morning, Captain."

"I can't hear you."

The captain's voice echoed across the field.

"GOOD MORNING, RECRUITS!"

"GOOD MORNING, CAPTAIN!"

"Better."

Captain Reyes paced slowly.

"Today, we're focusing on weapon assembly, emergency deployment, and live-fire accuracy."

The entire class looked horrified.

Valentina crossed her arms.

"I miss exams."

Several students nodded immediately.

Giselle looked equally miserable.

"I never thought I'd agree with her."

"Write that down," Lucas Harrington said dramatically. "It's a historic moment."

The class laughed.

Captain Reyes pointed toward the tables.

"Pairs. Move."

The students hurried forward.

Noah ended up beside Kai.

Lyra stood with Viv.

Olivia partnered with Charlotte Winters.

Giselle found herself beside Raiden.

"Wonderful," Giselle sighed.

Raiden smirked.

"You sound excited."

"I'm surrounded by weapons."

"That's the problem?"

"Yes."

Captain Reyes held up a folded rifle.

"When carried, your rifle remains compact."

With a practiced motion, he unfolded it.

Click.

Click.

Click.

The weapon locked into place.

"You have five seconds."

The students stared.

"No way," Parker Reed muttered.

Captain Reyes smiled.

"Begin."

Chaos erupted instantly.

Metal clattered everywhere.

Noah accidentally dropped half his rifle.

Kai burst out laughing.

"You're dead in an actual battle."

"Thank you for the encouragement."

Nearby, Olivia managed to finish first.

"Four point three seconds."

Charlotte looked offended.

"Are you secretly military?"

"No."

"You're suspiciously good at everything."

Across the table, Giselle was concentrating intensely.

"Three... two..."

Click.

The rifle locked.

"Four point one seconds."

Raiden raised an eyebrow.

"Show-off."

"I studied the manual."

"You studied a gun manual?"

"Of course."

Raiden stared.

"You need hobbies."

Meanwhile, Valentina was examining her rifle like it had personally offended her.

"Why does this have so many parts?"

"Because it's a gun," Sophia Reynolds replied.

"That doesn't answer my question."

Another burst of laughter spread through the group.

For the next hour, they practiced repeatedly.

Fold.

Unfold.

Fold.

Unfold.

Again.

Again.

Again.

By the twentieth attempt, everyone was exhausted.

Then Captain Reyes made an announcement.

"Shooting range."

Instant silence.

"Oh no," Noah whispered.

"Oh yes," Ethan corrected.

The students moved toward the firing lanes.

Military instructors handed out protective gear.

Captain Reyes demonstrated first.

Three shots rang out.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Three perfect hits. The students exchanged nervous glances. "Your turn." Noah stepped forward first. He aimed carefully.

Bang.

The shot completely missed. The class exploded with laughter. "Noah!" Viv shouted. "It moved!" "The target is stationary!" "It moved emotionally." Even Captain Reyes rubbed his forehead. Kai stepped forward next.

Bang.

Direct hit. "Oh come on." Kai grinned. "No natural talent here." Nearby, Olivia landed two clean shots. Charlotte managed one. Sophia hit the edge of the target. Lucas somehow hit the wrong target entirely. "Lucas!" "What?" "That wasn't yours." "Details." Meanwhile, Valentina squeezed the trigger.

Bang.

Bullseye.

The students froze. "You can shoot?" Ethan asked. Valentina shrugged casually. "My grandfather taught me." "Of course he did." "Is there anything you're bad at?" Valentina smiled. "Math." From across the range, Giselle immediately turned around. "Actually, your mathematics average is eighty-nine." Valentina pointed accusingly. "See? This is why nobody likes studying with you." More laughter followed. Then Raiden stepped into position. The conversations quieted. He adjusted his stance.

Aimed.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Three perfect bullseyes. The students stared. Noah looked horrified. "Excuse me?" Raiden lowered the rifle. "What?" "You've done this before." "No." "That's impossible." Even Captain Reyes looked impressed. "Very good." Raiden simply shrugged. The afternoon continued with more drills. More shooting. More assembly practice. More running. By sunset, everyone was exhausted. The students collapsed onto the grass while instructors packed away equipment. Noah lay flat on his back. "I can't feel my legs." "You'll be fine," Kai said. "I don't think I will." Nearby, Lyra and Viv shared a bottle of water. Olivia sat beside Charlotte. Valentina was fixing her hair despite being covered in dust. Giselle was somehow still reading a training handbook. And sat quietly nearby, watching the sunset. For a moment, the training felt almost normal. Like they were preparing for some distant possibility. Like the danger wasn't real.

Like the lockdowns, the military patrols, and the warnings were all temporary.

None of them knew how wrong they were.

Because somewhere beyond the safety of the training grounds, beyond the fences and checkpoints, something was still out there.

Waiting.

A week later, several military trucks rolled through the gates of Elysian Academy before sunrise.

The students climbed aboard in sleepy silence, carrying their training gear and water bottles. Nobody knew exactly where they were going. Captain Reyes had only told them to be ready by five in the morning.

After nearly two hours on the road, the convoy finally arrived at a massive military training facility surrounded by tall fences and watchtowers.

The moment the students stepped off the trucks, they realized they weren't alone.

Hundreds of students filled the base.

Groups wearing different academy uniforms stood in formation across the enormous training grounds.

"No way..." Kai Bennett whispered.

"There must be a thousand students here," Olivia Sterling said.

"That's comforting," Noah Whitmore replied. "Now there are a thousand people who can witness my humiliation."

"You assume you only have one humiliation today?" Ethan Blackwood asked.

"Noah's ambitious."

Nearby, students from other academies stared curiously at the newcomers.

Some waved.

Others looked just as nervous.

Captain Reyes stepped off the truck and immediately blew a whistle.

"Eyes forward!"

Every student straightened instantly.

The captain scanned the crowd.

"Today is different."

Nobody spoke.

"You've learned the basics. Today you'll train alongside students from other academies. You'll work harder than before. You'll move faster than before. And if you embarrass yourselves, please try not to do it in front of three hundred witnesses."

Several students laughed nervously.

Even Reyes allowed himself a faint smile.

"Move out."

The morning began with endurance drills.

Students sprinted across fields, crawled beneath nets, climbed walls, and carried weighted packs through obstacle courses.

By the second hour, everyone was exhausted.

Valentina looked personally offended by existence.

"My legs are filing complaints."

"They stopped functioning thirty minutes ago," Sophia Reynolds replied.

Giselle was somehow still keeping pace.

"I calculated that we've already run eight kilometers."

Noah stared at her.

"Why would you calculate that?"

"Because I wanted to know."

"Never do that again."

Laughter spread through the group despite their exhaustion.

The next exercise was far less familiar.

Hand-to-hand combat training.

Rows of padded mats covered a large section of the field while military instructors demonstrated defensive techniques.

A collective groan spread through the students.

"No."

"Nope."

"Absolutely not."

Captain Reyes folded his arms.

"You're doing it."

Several complaints immediately followed.

The captain ignored all of them.

"Out there, your weapon may fail."

He pointed toward the mats.

"You may be injured."

Then he pointed toward the students.

"But your brain and your body are always with you."

The field fell quiet.

"So learn how to use them."

Training began immediately.

Pairs formed across the mats.

The instructors demonstrated simple blocks, escapes, and takedowns before allowing the students to practice.

The first few attempts were disasters.

Noah attempted a defensive maneuver and immediately fell onto the mat.

The surrounding students burst into laughter.

"I was testing gravity."

"Gravity won," Kai said.

Across the field, Ethan faced Raiden.

"Go easy."

Raiden smiled.

"No promises."

Seconds later, Ethan found himself staring at the sky.

The surrounding students erupted with laughter.

"Okay," Ethan groaned. "Maybe a few promises."

Nearby, Lyra practiced with Viv.

The two moved carefully through the drills, correcting each other's mistakes.

"Your stance is too wide," Lyra said.

Viv adjusted slightly.

"Like this?"

"Better."

Across another mat, Valentina stood opposite a girl from another academy.

The girl looked confident.

Valentina looked annoyed.

"I just spent twenty minutes fixing my hair."

The girl laughed.

A second later, both nearly lost their balance trying a takedown drill.

By lunchtime, everyone was covered in dust and sweat.

Students from different academies sat together beneath shaded shelters.

Conversations flowed more easily than expected. And later after lunch when they had a short break the walked, Kai suddenly stopped walking.

"No way."

Noah nearly walked into him.

"What now?"

Kai pointed across the field.

A group of students wearing dark navy training uniforms had just climbed off another military truck.

Several of them looked very familiar.

Ethan's eyes widened.

"You're kidding."

"Oh no," Olivia muttered.

Lyra immediately recognized them.

"The Ravenscrest basketball team."

A collective groan spread through the Elysian students.

Leading the group was Adrian Cole, Ravenscrest's captain and Elysian's longest-running rival on the court.

The moment Adrian spotted them, a grin appeared on his face.

"Well, well."

He walked over with several teammates.

"I should've known Elysian would be here."

Kai folded his arms.

"I was having a good morning."

"That makes one of us," Adrian replied.

Several Ravenscrest players laughed.

Noah leaned toward Ethan.

"I already miss the obstacle course."

"Same."

Adrian's eyes moved across the group.

"Still losing basketball finals?"

Ethan immediately stepped forward.

"Still living off that one championship from two years ago?"

"Oh, we're doing this already?" Noah sighed.

Captain Reyes appeared before things could escalate.

The students immediately straightened.

The captain looked from one group to the other.

"I assume you all know each other."

Nobody answered.

"Wonderful."

His expression suggested the opposite.

"Since you're clearly so enthusiastic, you'll be paired together for combat drills."

The collective horror was immediate.

"What?"

"No!"

"Captain!"

Even some Ravenscrest students looked offended.

Captain Reyes ignored every complaint.

"If you can spend years competing on a basketball court, you can spend one afternoon working together."

The students exchanged miserable looks.

Beside Noah, Kai groaned.

"This is punishment."

Captain Reyes nodded.

"Correct."

For the first time all day, even the military instructors struggled not to laugh.

By the start of combat training, Elysian and Below them, voices drifted from the dormitories.

Students laughing.

Talking.

Trying to enjoy the small amount of freedom they still had.

For a moment, it almost felt normal.

Then footsteps echoed from the staircase.

The rooftop door opened.

Noah Whitmore appeared first.

"Found you."

Behind him came Kai Bennett, Ethan Blackwood, Olivia Sterling, Giselle, Valentina, and Raiden.

Viv groaned.

"This was supposed to be a private conversation."

"Then stop choosing the most obvious hiding place in the academy," Noah replied.

"The rooftop garden is literally where everyone goes."

"It's not."

"It is."

The argument ended before it could begin when Ethan dropped onto a nearby bench.

"My legs still hurt."

"From training?" Olivia asked.

"From existing."

Kai laughed.

"That's not how muscles work."

"It's how mine work."

Valentina sat carefully beside Giselle.

"Please tell me we're done with military training for at least a week."

Giselle looked up from the training handbook she was somehow still carrying.

"We have another session in three days."

Valentina stared at her.

"Why would you know that?"

"Because I read the schedule."

"No normal person does that."

Raiden chuckled quietly.

The group slowly settled around the rooftop.

For a while, the conversation stayed light.

They complained about Captain Reyes.

They complained about running.

They complained about waking up before sunrise.

Mostly, they complained about everything.

"The obstacle course was impossible," Noah declared.

"You fell into a mud pit," Kai replied.

"Exactly."

"That wasn't the obstacle."

"Details."

Laughter spread through the group.

Even Tara smiled.

A small one.

But genuine.

Lyra noticed immediately.

And felt relieved.

Then Noah glanced toward the sky.

"Anyone else think it's weird?"

The conversation slowed.

"Weird how?" Olivia asked.

Noah shrugged.

"I don't know."

His eyes followed the darkening horizon.

"Everything's just..."

He searched for the right word.

"Quiet."

Nobody disagreed.

The lockdowns still existed.

Military patrols still moved through the towns.

The government still issued warnings every week.

Yet somehow, things felt calmer than before.

Almost too calm.

Raiden leaned against the wall.

"My father says people get used to anything eventually."

"What does that mean?" Viv asked.

"It means people stop being afraid."

A silence followed.

The statement felt heavier than expected.

Below them, the lights of the academy flickered on one by one.

The campus glowed softly beneath the evening sky.

For a moment, they simply sat together.

No training.

No instructors.

No military officers.

Just students.

Friends.

Trying to enjoy a rare peaceful evening.

Then Tara suddenly stiffened.

Lyra noticed immediately.

"Tara?"

Tara's eyes were fixed on something beyond the academy walls.

Far beyond.

Toward the distant tree line.

Everyone followed her gaze.

"What is it?" Kai asked.

Tara didn't answer immediately.

Her face had gone pale.

For a brief second, she thought she saw a faint blue light moving between the trees.

A tiny flicker.

Gone almost as quickly as it appeared.

When she blinked, it was gone.

Nothing remained except darkness.

"Tara?"

She forced herself to look away.

"It's nothing."

But her voice sounded uncertain.

Very uncertain.

The others eventually returned to their conversations.

The laughter slowly returned.

The rooftop filled with familiar voices once again.

Yet Tara couldn't stop looking toward the distant forest.

Because deep down...

She wasn't entirely sure she had imagined it.

students found themselves paired together across the mats.

Every drill became a competition.

Every sprint became a race.

Every exercise became a battle for bragging rights. And despite all the complaints, insults, and endless trash talk...

Both groups somehow ended up pushing each other harder than anyone else on the field. The next exercise involved carrying injured teammates across a muddy field while avoiding simulated hazards.

The students immediately regretted every decision that had brought them there.

"Noah."

"What?"

"Pick up the stretcher."

"I don't want to."

"That's unfortunate."

Captain Reyes walked past.

"Move faster."

"We're dying, Captain."

"No, you're exercising."

"There is a difference?"

"Not from where I'm standing."

The students groaned.

Despite the complaints, they pushed forward.

Every exercise demanded teamwork.

Every challenge forced them to rely on each other.

And slowly, almost without noticing, they improved.

As the sun began to set, the final drill ended.

The exhausted students collapsed onto the grass.

Nobody had enough energy left to speak for several minutes.

Captain Reyes walked between the rows.

For a moment, his expression softened.

"You did well today."

Several heads lifted.

The captain rarely handed out compliments.

"You worked harder than you thought you could."

The students listened carefully.

"You looked after each other."

His gaze swept across the group.

"That's what matters."

The field grew quiet.

Captain Reyes crossed his arms.

"I know this training isn't easy."

Nobody argued.

"But difficult days reveal who people really are."

The setting sun painted the training grounds gold.

Around them, students from dozens of academies packed equipment and prepared to leave.

For a brief moment, everything felt peaceful.

Captain Reyes looked toward the distant horizon.

His expression changed.

Only slightly.

But enough.

As if he were worried about something.

As if he knew something the students didn't.

Then he turned back to them.

"Get some rest."

The students began gathering their equipment.

Laughing.

Complaining.

Helping one another onto their feet.

None of them noticed the faint blue lights that briefly flickered in the distant evening sky beyond the mountains.

And if Captain Reyes noticed them...

He said nothing.

The Shared Vision

As the students returned to Elysian Academy, the evening settled into a strange hush. After two months of training, the students drifted back toward the dorm, seeking a semblance of normalcy. Viv nudged Lyra by the window, and the two slipped outside, making their way to the old rooftop garden—a hidden sanctuary above the dorms. The city below was muted, shops dark, streets empty. “It’s been weeks,” Viv murmured. “The lockdown, the calls—we barely speak to our parents now.” Lyra nodded, her gaze drifting to Tara, who sat silently at the edge, arms wrapped around her legs. Lyra touched her shoulder. Tara lowered her gaze. Lyra waited patiently. Viv sat nearby, watching Tara carefully. Finally, Tara spoke. “Sometimes...” Her voice was barely audible. “Sometimes I think I see them.” Lyra frowned. “The butterflies?” and then there was silence again. Lyra nodded slowly, glancing at Tara, who sat with her arms wrapped tightly around her knees, distant. “Tara, are you okay?” Lyra asked, her voice soft. Tara hesitated, her fingers tracing the edge of her jeans. “I was okay... until last night,” she stammered. “I used to see the butterflies, but now... I see something else. Tendrils.” Lyra’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?” Tara swallowed hard. “It’s like... it’s not even my own vision. I see other people’s eyes, and they’re being attacked. I just see these tendrils everywhere, like something is reaching.” “And then?” Tara’s fingers tightened around her sleeves. “When I look again, it’s gone.” The rooftop fell silent. Lyra wasn’t sure what to say. Before Lyra could reply, the rooftop door creaked open, and one by one, Demi and Sandi joined them, their faces full of concern. Tara looked away suddenly, wanting to change the topic, not wanting her friends to be worried. “We heard you... no need to hide it,” Viv, Tara and Lyra exchanged glances. “I... didn’t want to make you guys worried so...” Tara murmured. “And I’m sorry for not telling these things to you guys either,” she said with a bare smile. Sandi sat beside Tara, legged crossed, putting a hand over Tara’s shoulders and said “hey.. its alright no need to apologise,” Demi said, sitting down beside Sandi, looking over at Tara. “We’re all here.” Viv nodded. “You don’t have to be alone in this. We’ll figure it out.” Tara took a shaky breath, and the weight in her chest lightened slightly. They didn’t have answers yet, but together, maybe, they’d face what was coming. Below them, voices drifted from the dormitories. Students laughing. Talking. Trying to enjoy the small amount of freedom they still had. For a moment, it almost felt normal. Then footsteps echoed from the staircase. The rooftop door opened. Noah Whitmore appeared first. “Found you.” Behind him came Kai Bennett, Ethan Blackwood, Olivia Sterling, Giselle, Valentina, and Raiden. Viv groaned. “This was supposed to be a private conversation.” “Then stop choosing the most obvious hiding place in the academy,” Noah replied. “The rooftop garden is literally where everyone goes.” “It’s not.” “It is.” The argument ended before it could begin when Ethan dropped onto a nearby bench. “My legs still hurt.” “From training?” Olivia asked. “From existing.” Kai laughed. “That’s not how muscles work.” “It’s how mine work.” Valentina sat carefully beside Giselle. “Please tell me we’re done with military training for at least a week.” Giselle looked up from the training handbook she was somehow still carrying. “We have another session in three days.” Valentina stared at her. “Why would you know that?” “Because I read the schedule.” “No normal person does that.” Raiden chuckled quietly. The group slowly settled around the rooftop. For a while, the conversation stayed light. They complained about Captain Reyes. They complained about running. They complained about waking up before sunrise. Mostly, they complained about everything. “The obstacle course was impossible,” Noah declared. “You fell into a mud pit,” Kai replied. “Exactly.” “That wasn’t the obstacle.” “Details.” Laughter spread through the group. Even Tara smiled. A small one. But genuine. Lyra noticed immediately. And felt relieved. Then Noah glanced toward the sky. “Anyone else think it’s weird?” The conversation slowed. “Weird how?” Olivia asked. Noah shrugged. “I don’t know.” His eyes followed the darkening horizon. “Everything’s just...” He searched for the right word. “Quiet.” Nobody disagreed. The lockdowns still existed. Military patrols still moved through the towns. The government still issued warnings every week. Yet somehow, things felt calmer than before. Almost too calm. Raiden leaned against the wall. “My father says people get used to anything

eventually. ""What does that mean?" Viv asked. "It means people stop being afraid." A silence followed. The statement felt heavier than expected. Below them, the lights of the academy flickered on one by one. The campus glowed softly beneath the evening sky. For a moment, they simply sat together. No training. No instructors. No military officers. Just students. Friends. Trying to enjoy a rare peaceful evening. Then Tara suddenly stiffened. Lyra noticed immediately "Tara?" Tara's eyes were fixed on something beyond the academy walls. Far beyond. Toward the distant tree line. Everyone followed her gaze. "What is it?" Kai asked. Tara didn't answer immediately. Her face had gone pale. For a brief second, she thought she saw a faint blue light moving between the trees. A tiny flicker. Gone almost as quickly as it appeared. When she blinked, it was gone. Nothing remained except darkness. "Tara?" She forced herself to look away. "It's nothing." But her voice sounded uncertain. Very uncertain. The others eventually returned to their conversations. The laughter slowly returned. The rooftop filled with familiar voices once again. Yet Tara couldn't stop looking toward the distant forest. Because deep down... She wasn't entirely sure she had imagined it.

Captain Reyes gathered them by the truck, his expression serious but calm. "Listen up, everyone. Supplies are low. We've run out of food here at the academy, and it's time we take a step out, carefully, to the nearest convenience store. I know this is risky, but we have to stay together. Get what you need, and stay alert." Kai exchanged a worried look with Noah. "I can't believe we're going out there," Kai muttered. Noah nodded, clutching his rifle strap. Raiden, always grounded, added, "We stay together. No one gets left behind." As they moved toward the city, the streets were hauntingly silent. Valentina shivered, whispering, "It's like a horror movie. I can't believe we're really doing this." Giselle adjusted her glasses, her voice tight. "I just need to get home, and I need my grades to stay on track. I can't fail now." Captain Reyes put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I know, Giselle. Keep your focus. This is just a step." They reached the store. The convenience store was almost empty by the time the students finished gathering supplies.

Groups from Elysian Academy and several other academies moved between the shelves, filling bags with canned food, bottled water, and whatever essentials remained.

Captain Reyes checked his watch.

"All right, everyone. We're leaving. Stay in formation."

The students filed outside.

For a brief moment, the street was silent.

Too silent.

No wind.

No birds.

Nothing.

Raiden's expression darkened.

"Something's wrong."

Kai felt it too.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Then came the sound.

A distant clicking.

Followed by another.

And another.

Every student froze.

"What is that?" Valentina whispered.

Nobody answered.

The clicking grew louder.

Closer.

Captain Reyes immediately raised his rifle.

"Everybody back!"

The order had barely left his mouth when a blue shape burst from a nearby alley.

Then another.

Then five more.

The creatures moved with terrifying speed.

Students screamed.

The formation shattered instantly.

"CONTACT!"

Gunfire erupted.

The street exploded into chaos.

Aliens poured from rooftops, alleys, broken storefronts, and abandoned vehicles.

There were dozens of them.

Maybe more.

"Noah!" Kai shouted.

"I'm here!"

The two immediately dropped behind an overturned car.

Nearby, Raiden fired three controlled shots.

One creature collapsed.

Another leapt from a building.

Raiden rolled aside and fired again.

"Keep moving!" he yelled.

Students from every academy scattered across the street.

Military instructors tried desperately to regroup them.

"Stay together!"

"Move to cover!"

"Don't stop!"

Another scream echoed from further down the road.

One of the other academy groups had been separated.

The students watched in horror as several creatures overwhelmed the formation.

The military rushed toward them, but it was too late.

Panic spread through the street.

"They're everywhere!" someone shouted.

Valentina knelt beside a barricade.

Her hands trembled only slightly as she aimed.

Bang.

Bang.

Two accurate shots.

A creature fell.

Beside her, Sandi fired rapidly.

"We need to move!"

"I know!"

Across the street, Noah and Kai covered a retreating group of students.

Their training suddenly felt very real.

Every lesson.

Every drill.

Every early morning.

It all mattered now.

Kai fired.

A creature dropped.

Noah fired.

Another stumbled.

"Keep going!" Noah yelled to the fleeing students.

The street became a maze of smoke, debris, and confusion.

Students from different academies called out names, trying to find friends.

Some answered.

Others didn't.

Captain Reyes appeared through the chaos.

“GET BACK TO THE TRUCK! GO! GO! MOVE!”

The surviving students immediately began moving. Raiden covered the rear. Valentina stayed close to Sandi. Kai refused to leave Noah. Around them, military personnel fought desperately to create a safe route. The cost was obvious. Too many students from the other academies had already fallen during the initial attack. The reality hit everyone at once. This wasn't training. This wasn't another exercise. People weren't being eliminated from a drill. They were gone. The realization struck harder than any bullet. As the survivors finally reached the town square, Captain Reyes quickly counted heads. His face grew paler with every missing name. The students stood there, exhausted and shaking. Nobody spoke. Nobody joked. Nobody complained. The confidence they'd built during months of training had vanished. All around them, sirens echoed through the city. And for the first time since the lockdown began, every student understood the truth. The war they had been preparing for had finally arrived. The street had dissolved into complete chaos.

Students from multiple academies sprinted toward the military trucks as gunfire echoed through the city. The creatures were everywhere—darting between abandoned cars, climbing walls, appearing from shattered buildings.

"Move! Move!" military instructors shouted.

The first groups reached the trucks and scrambled aboard.

Noah practically shoved Kai up the ramp.

"Get inside!"

"I'm trying!"

Valentina and Sandi followed close behind, while Raiden stayed near the rear, covering the retreating students.

Captain Reyes stood on the truck's ramp, scanning the street.

"Everybody aboard! Move!"

One by one, students climbed inside.

Then Reyes froze.

His eyes swept across the crowd again.

Something was wrong.

He counted quickly.

Once.

Twice.

Then his expression changed.

"Where's Lyra?"

Several students immediately looked around.

The answer came seconds later.

Far behind the retreating crowd.

Near the center of the street.

Tara stood completely still.

She wasn't running.

She wasn't reacting.

Her eyes stared blankly into the distance. Her eyes glowed faintly blue, but she didn't blink, didn't move. Lyra skidded to a halt and spun around, breathless. "Tara—what's wrong?" she asked, her voice tight with fear. No reply.. "Tara!" Lyra shouted. The girl didn't respond. Not even a blink. Lyra turned around immediately. "What are you doing?" Noah yelled from the truck. But Lyra was already running back. "Lyra!" Captain Reyes shouted. She ignored him. The distance between Tara and the approaching creatures was shrinking. Fast. Lyra reached her first. "Tara!" Nothing. The blue glow remained. The blank stare remained. For a terrifying second, it felt as though Tara couldn't even hear her. Back at the truck, Demi saw what was happening. "Oh no." Without hesitation, she jumped off the truck. "Demi!" Sandi shouted. Several students instinctively tried to follow. But military personnel blocked them. "No!" "We have to help them!" "You'll only make it worse!" Kai struggled against one of the soldiers. "Let us go!" "No!" Meanwhile, Demi sprinted toward Lyra. Together they grabbed Tara's arms. "Tara, come on!" Still no response. The creatures were getting closer. The clicking sounds echoed through the street. Lyra's heart pounded. "We have to move!" Finally, Tara stumbled slightly. It wasn't much. But it was enough. And all of a sudden things slowed down for Lyra as Tara moved to run she saw her neck, on it something was there glowing faintly... A mark...? and somehow it even glowed, it glowed in blue. Lyra soon came to her senses, The girls immediately began dragging her toward the truck. Behind them, the creatures closed in. The truck engine roared louder. The driver couldn't wait forever. Captain Reyes stood on the ramp. "COME ON!" The distance seemed impossible. Twenty meters. Fifteen. Ten. The truck began moving. Slowly at first. Then faster. "No!" Lyra gasped. Demi tightened her grip on Tara. "Run!" The three girls pushed themselves forward. The truck rolled ahead. Students inside were screaming their names.

"Lyra!"

"Demi!"

"Tara!"

Captain Reyes grabbed the side rail. "Faster!" The girls sprinted with everything they had left. Just as the truck gained speed, Demi jumped. Her fingers caught the edge of the ramp. A student grabbed her arm. Then Lyra jumped. She hit the metal ramp hard, nearly slipping off. Noah lunged forward and caught her wrist. "Got you!" But Tara was still behind. For one horrible second, everyone thought she wouldn't make it. Then Tara suddenly surged forward. She leaped. Her shoulder slammed into the ramp. The impact knocked the breath from her lungs. Raiden and Kai immediately grabbed her and pulled her inside. The ramp began closing. The truck accelerated away from the street. Inside, the three girls collapsed onto the floor. Bruised. Shaken. Breathing hard. For several seconds nobody spoke. Captain Reyes finally stepped forward. His face was pale with anger and relief. He looked directly at Lyra and Demi. "What were you thinking?" Neither answered. "You could have been killed." His voice wasn't loud anymore. That somehow made it worse. "You do not take risks like that." The truck fell silent. Reyes looked at Tara next. The faint blue glow in her eyes had disappeared. She simply stared at the floor. Then the captain exhaled heavily. "You three are lucky." For a moment, he sounded less like a military officer and more like someone who had almost lost people he cared about. The girls lowered their heads. Around them, the other students sat in exhausted silence. Outside, the ruined city disappeared behind them. But nobody inside the truck would forget what had happened on that street. The truck sped on, and in the distance, they saw it—the city, once familiar, now fractured by smoke and silent streets. Students from the other academy lay scattered—some motionless, others desperately trying to drag themselves to safety, but the aliens closed in. Valentina's sharp eyes caught the worst of it—one student was dragged away, screaming as

his friends fired blindly, trying to protect him. And while in another corner some of the students lie dying still holding to their last breath as he was being cut through his stomach and mouth his eyes stared into the sky finally accepting his fate just then an alien jumped onto his face, the captain and the students inside the truck looked away the girls gasping. There was silence. By the time they reached the academy gates, their bodies ached, and their minds were haunted by what they couldn't unsee. Tara kept staring ahead, her blue eyes reflecting nothing but emptiness as the truck rattled back toward the academy, carrying them into another night of fear. The students sat wherever they had collapsed after the escape. Nobody looked untouched. Dust covered their uniforms. Several students had cuts and bruises. Kai remained beside him, silently staring at the floor. Valentina was pressing a bandage against a scrape on her arm while Raiden helped another injured student from a neighboring academy. Across the truck, Lyra and Demi sat beside Tara. Tara still hadn't spoken. She simply stared ahead. Silent. Distant. The faint blue glow that had filled her eyes earlier was gone. Captain Reyes stood near the front of the truck, speaking quietly with several soldiers. His expression was grim. Nearby, Giselle was busy inspecting a tear in her sleeve. "My jacket is ruined." Nobody responded. Giselle looked around. "My favorite jacket." Still nobody answered. Valentina slowly turned toward her. "Giselle." "What?" "We were attacked by aliens." "I know." "We almost died." "I know." Valentina blinked. "Then why are you talking about your jacket?" Giselle looked genuinely confused. "Because it's ruined." Noah covered his face. Kai groaned. Raiden shook his head. "Unbelievable." Giselle crossed her arms. "What? I can be concerned about multiple things at once." "You are impossible," Valentina muttered. A moment later, Giselle adjusted her glasses and looked toward Captain Reyes. "How many casualties were there?" The truck suddenly became quiet. Captain Reyes didn't answer immediately. His eyes moved across the students. Especially the empty seats. The seats that should have been occupied by students from the other academies. When he finally spoke, his voice was lower than usual. "Too many." Nobody asked another question. Even Giselle looked away. For several minutes, only the sound of the truck engine filled the silence. Then Noah glanced toward Tara. "She's still not saying anything." Lyra's expression tightened. "I know." Demi looked worried. "She hasn't spoken since the street." Giselle frowned slightly. For once, she wasn't thinking about herself. She studied Tara carefully. "The blue glow in her eyes..." Several students looked at her. "What about it?" Kai asked. Giselle hesitated. "I've been reading every government report they've released." "Of course you have," Noah muttered. She ignored him. "And none of them mentioned anything like that." The truck grew quiet again. Even Captain Reyes glanced over. Giselle swallowed. "I'm just saying..." Her voice became softer. "Whatever happened back there..." She looked at Tara. "...I don't think it was normal." Nobody had an answer for that. Not even Captain Reyes. Outside, the city disappeared behind them as the truck continued toward the academy. And inside, surrounded by frightened students and uneasy silence, Tara kept staring ahead. As if part of her mind was somewhere else entirely.

By the time they reached the academy gates, their bodies ached, and their minds were haunted by what they couldn't unsee. Tara kept staring ahead, her blue eyes reflecting nothing but emptiness as the truck rattled back toward the academy, carrying them into another night of fear. By the time the trucks returned to Elysian Academy, darkness had begun settling over. The students climbed out slowly, exhausted from the attack. Nobody was talking much anymore. The reality of what had happened in the city still hung over them. Captain Reyes stood near the entrance of the main dome, watching as the students gathered. His uniform was stained with dust, and he looked far older than he had that morning. "Everyone get cleaned up and rest." The students nodded weakly. The captain hesitated before speaking again. "If any of you need to talk about what happened today, report to the main dorm later tonight." His gaze swept across the group. "Nobody is expected to deal with this alone." For a moment, his strict military tone faded. Then he straightened. "Dismissed." The students slowly dispersed. Later that evening, one of the common rooms inside the dormitory had become unusually crowded. Tara sat curled up on one end of a couch. Lyra sat beside her. Demi and Sandi occupied nearby chairs. Across the room, Noah, Kai, Valentina, Olivia, Raiden, Viv, and a few others

had gathered as well. Nobody seemed particularly interested in sleeping. Not after today. The room remained quiet until Lyra finally spoke. "Tara." Tara looked up. Lyra hesitated. "Are you okay if I tell them?" Tara already knew what she meant. The butterfly mark. The visions. The strange things she had been seeing. For a moment, she stared at the floor. Then she nodded. "I don't want to hide it anymore." The room immediately grew attentive. Kai sat forward. Noah looked confused. Even Raiden raised an eyebrow. Lyra took a breath. "There's something you all need to know." And then she told them everything. The butterflies. The visions.

The blue glow in Tara's eyes.

The things she had seen before they happened.

By the time she finished, the room had fallen completely silent.

"What?"

Noah finally said.

"That's impossible."

"I know how it sounds," Lyra replied.

"No, I mean..."

He pointed toward Tara.

"She's basically connected to them?"

Tara looked uncomfortable.

Valentina slowly sat down.

"Okay."

She paused.

"That's terrifying."

"Very terrifying," Sandi agreed.

"Extremely terrifying," Noah added.

Before anyone could continue, the dormitory door suddenly opened.

Giselle entered carrying three notebooks, two folders, and what looked suspiciously like a government report.

Everyone groaned.

"Giselle."

"What?"

"Why are you carrying paperwork?"

"It's useful."

"No."

"It is."

The argument ended when Giselle noticed the atmosphere.

She adjusted her glasses.

"What happened?"

Five minutes later, Lyra had explained everything again.

This time Giselle listened carefully.

Very carefully.

When Lyra finished, Giselle remained silent for several moments.

Then her eyes slowly moved toward Tara.

"Can you draw it?"

Everyone looked at her.

"What?"

"The visions."

Giselle pointed toward Tara.

"If you're seeing things, draw exactly what you see."

The room fell quiet.

Tara hesitated.

Then she nodded.

Someone handed her a sketchbook and pencil.

For several minutes, the only sound was the scratching of graphite against paper.

Nobody interrupted.

Nobody spoke.

Eventually Tara stopped drawing.

She handed the sketchbook to Lyra.

Lyra frowned.

"What is that?"

The sketch showed a distorted view of a city street.

Buildings.

Vehicles.

Students running.

And in the foreground—

Dark tendrils.

Several alien creatures.

The image felt wrong somehow.

As if it wasn't being viewed from a human perspective.

Giselle immediately took the sketchbook.

Her eyes widened.

"Wait."

"What?" Kai asked.

She turned several pages.

Examining every drawing.

The room watched silently.

Then Giselle looked up.

"Tara."

Her voice sounded unusually serious.

"When you see these visions..."

She pointed toward the sketch.

"Do they feel like memories?"

Tara thought about it.

Then slowly nodded.

"A little."

The room fell silent again.

Giselle looked toward Lyra.

Then toward the drawing.

Then back toward Tara.

"I think she's seeing through their eyes."

Nobody spoke.

For several seconds, nobody even breathed.

"What?" Noah finally asked.

Giselle pointed toward the sketches.

"Look at the perspective."

Everyone leaned closer.

"The viewpoint isn't human."

A chill ran through the room.

"It's too low."

Giselle swallowed.

"And the creatures keep appearing in the center of every image."

Raiden frowned.

"You think she's seeing what the aliens see?"

"Maybe."

The room suddenly felt colder.

Lyra looked toward Tara.

Then something clicked.

"The butterflies."

Everyone turned toward her.

"What about them?" Demi asked.

Lyra sat forward.

"The scientists said the butterflies appeared before the aliens."

Nobody interrupted.

"And they said the butterflies might somehow be connected."

Giselle's eyes widened. "Tara was marked by one." The realization slowly spread through the room. Valentina's face lost color. "Oh no." Kai stared at Tara. "You think the butterflies did this?" "Maybe," Lyra whispered. She looked toward Tara. "Maybe the mark connected her to them somehow." The room remained silent. Then Giselle quietly added: "And when her eyes turn blue..." Everyone looked toward Tara. "...that might be when the connection activates." Not even a little. "The aliens could be seeing through her," Raiden said. "The same way she sees through them." Noah slowly stood up. "I officially hate this." "Same," Kai said immediately. For once, nobody laughed. Because the possibility was horrifying. If the aliens could see through Tara... Then they might know where she was. Where the academy was. Where all of them were. The room grew quiet. Outside, the academy lights glowed softly against the night. Inside, nobody seemed eager to speak. Because for the first time... They weren't just fighting the aliens anymore. The aliens might already be back.

THE FINAL DECISIONS

After the big horror and the weighted conversation they had, they rested and in the afternoon captain Reyes gathered the students from neighbour academies from last day, not to train not to exercise but to discuss. Rows of chairs filled the room.

Students from neighboring academies sat alongside Elysian students, talking quietly among themselves.

The atmosphere felt tense.

Word had spread quickly.

The military had discovered something.

At exactly two o'clock, Captain Reyes walked onto the stage.

Beside him stood Dr. Chen, carrying several folders and a tablet.

The conversations immediately died.

Captain Reyes looked across the room.

"Thank you for coming."

Nobody spoke.

The captain folded his hands behind his back.

"We've spent the last several weeks studying the creatures."

A projector screen lit up behind him.

Several images of the aliens appeared.

A nervous murmur spread through the crowd.

Captain Reyes continued.

"And we've finally discovered something important."

The room became completely silent.

Dr. Chen stepped forward.

"Most of you probably noticed the sirens during yesterday's attack."

Several students nodded.

Kai exchanged a glance with Noah.

Valentina sat forward.

Dr. Chen pressed a button.

A video appeared on the screen.

It showed several creatures moving through a city street.

Then a warning siren began sounding.

Immediately, the creatures slowed.

Some stumbled.

Others became disoriented.

The entire room leaned forward.

"What?" Noah whispered.

Dr. Chen nodded.

"Exactly."

Captain Reyes took over.

"The sirens affected them."

Students immediately began talking among themselves.

"How?"

"Why?"

"What does that mean?". The captain raised a hand.

The room quieted.

"We believe these creatures rely heavily on sound."

Raiden frowned.

"What about their eyes?"

Dr. Chen brought up another image.

A close-up scan of one of the creatures.

"The eyes exist."

She pointed toward the image.

"But not in the way human eyes function."

Giselle's hand immediately shot up.

Of course it did.

Captain Reyes sighed.

"Yes, Giselle?"

"Are you saying they're effectively blind?"

Several students turned toward her.

Dr. Chen smiled slightly.

"Not completely."

She changed the slide.

"But they don't appear to process visual information the way humans do "We think they create a type of sound-based map."

But near the middle of the hall, a very different conversation was happening without words.

Lyra slowly turned toward Tara.

Tara had gone completely still.

Beside her, Demi noticed.

Then Sandi.

Across the row, Kai caught Lyra's expression.

Noah followed his gaze.

One by one, the members of the group exchanged uneasy looks.

Giselle adjusted her glasses. The notebook remained open on her lap

"guys see..our theory might be right it almost did proved they have no vision but through the marked people they link the vision and understand their surrounding with sounds"

The others nodded Tara giving a weak smile

At the top of the page, written in neat handwriting, were four words: Dr. Chen changed the slide once more.

"Our current research suggests the creatures rely primarily on sound."

The diagram behind her highlighted the hearing organs.

"They appear to construct their understanding of the world through vibrations, echoes, and movement."

Several students nodded.

Others scribbled notes.

But near the middle of the hall, a very different conversation was happening without words.

Lyra slowly turned toward Tara.

Tara had gone completely still.

Beside her, Demi noticed.

Then Sandi. Across the row, Kai caught Lyra's expression. Noah followed his gaze. One by one, the members of the group exchanged uneasy looks. Giselle adjusted her glasses. Her notebook remained open on her lap. Then Dr. Chen changed the slide again. A second image appeared. One that showed the remains of a destroyed creature. "There's something else." The room became quiet. Dr. Chen pointed toward the image. "Fire." Several students exchanged confused looks. "Fire?" Lyra asked. Captain Reyes nodded. "The creatures are highly vulnerable to it." Noah blinked. "You're telling me aliens crossed space just to lose to fire?" Several students laughed. Even Captain Reyes smiled. "A little more complicated than that." The captain walked slowly across the stage. "But yes." He pointed toward the screen. "Fire damages them significantly faster than conventional weapons." Valentina looked impressed. "That's actually useful." "It is." Then Captain Reyes' expression became serious again. "Which brings us to the reason you're all here." The room immediately quieted. The captain looked at every student. One by one. "We're planning an operation." Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The words felt heavy. Very heavy. "What kind of operation?" Raiden asked. Captain Reyes folded his arms. Captain Reyes allowed the discussion about sound and fire to settle before continuing.

Then he changed the slide.

A map of the region appeared behind him.

Several red circles marked areas where alien activity had been reported.

The room immediately grew quieter.

"The creatures are spreading."

His voice was calm, but the seriousness behind it was impossible to miss.

"We've confirmed multiple attacks in the surrounding towns."

Several students shifted uncomfortably.

Everyone remembered the students who had died during the city attack.

Captain Reyes looked across the hall.

"If we allow them to continue spreading, more people will die."

Nobody argued.

Nobody could.

Dr. Chen stepped forward.

"We've been developing a containment plan."

A new diagram appeared on the screen.

Lines stretched from the city toward two locations.

One was the military base.

The other was Elysian Academy.

Confused murmurs spread through the hall.

Noah frowned.

"What are those?"

Dr. Chen pointed toward the lines.

"Siren stations."

The hall became silent.

Captain Reyes nodded.

"We intend to install a chain of powerful sirens across the region."

Several students immediately understood.

The creatures hated the sound.

The sirens would attract them.

Guide them.

Control their movement. Kai slowly sat forward. "You want to lure them somewhere." "Correct." Captain Reyes didn't hesitate. The room became uneasy. "And once they're gathered?" Raiden asked. Dr. Chen looked toward Captain Reyes. The captain answered himself. "We destroy the entire location." Silence. Absolute silence. Valentina blinked. "You mean..." "With fire." The room erupted. "What?" "The whole place?" "Seriously?" Captain Reyes raised a hand. The noise slowly died. "We believe a concentrated fire operation would eliminate the majority of the creatures at once." The projector displayed the two highlighted locations again. The military base. And Elysian Academy. A strange tension filled the room. Then Captain Reyes surprised everyone. "We've already discussed this with military command." He paused. "But before a final decision is made..." His eyes swept across the students. "...I want to hear your opinions." The room stared. Even Dr. Chen looked surprised. Captain Reyes pointed toward the screen. "The military base." Then Elysian Academy. "If one of these locations becomes the lure point, it will likely be destroyed." A stunned silence followed. For several seconds nobody spoke. Then Noah raised his hand. "The military base." "Agreed," Kai immediately said. Valentina nodded. "The base." Raiden folded his arms. "Military base. One by one, students began answering. "The base." "Military base." "The base." Soon almost the entire hall was saying the same thing. Captain Reyes listened carefully. Finally, Lyra spoke. "Elysian is our home." The room became quiet. She glanced around. "We don't even have classes anymore." A few students laughed softly. "But it's still our school." Demi nodded. Sandi nodded too. "It's one of the only

normal things we still have."More students agreed.Even some from neighboring academies.Valentina looked toward the academy windows."I don't want to lose it."Neither did anyone else.For months the academy had been more than a school.It had become a shelter.A home.A place where they still felt human.Captain Reyes remained silent for a long moment.Then he nodded."The military base it is."Relieved murmurs spread through the hall.The decision felt unanimous.The academy would remain standing.The military base would become the trap.Dr. Chen switched off the projector."The sirens will guide the creatures toward the base."Captain Reyes folded his arms."And once enough of them gather..."His expression hardened."We end this."For the first time since the invasion began, the students felt something they hadn't felt in months.Not fear.Not uncertainty.Hope.Because for the first time...They weren't waiting for the aliens to attack. They were preparing to strike first. The meeting had ended nearly twenty minutes ago.

Most of the students had already returned to their dorms, discussing the operation and the military base plan.

The academy grounds had become quiet.

Near one of the garden paths behind the main dormitory, Captain Reyes was gathering paperwork before heading back to headquarters when he heard footsteps approaching.

He looked up.

Lyra.

Demi.

Viv.

Sandi.

And Tara.

The captain immediately noticed their expressions.

Something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked.

The girls exchanged nervous glances.

Lyra stepped forward.

"Captain... there's something we haven't told you."

Reyes set the papers aside.

"You have my attention."

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then Tara slowly rolled up the sleeve of her uniform.

The blue butterfly mark became visible.

Captain Reyes' expression changed immediately.

"What is that?"

The girls exchanged another look.

Viv finally answered.

"We think it's connected to the aliens."

The captain frowned.

"Explain."

And so they did.

Everything.

The butterflies.

The mark.

The visions.

The blue glow in Tara's eyes.

The sketches.

The strange perspectives.

The theory that marked people might somehow be linked to the creatures.

Captain Reyes listened without interrupting.

Not once.

When they finally finished, silence settled over the garden.

The captain looked at Tara's arm again.

Then at the girls.

"How certain are you?"

"We're not completely certain," Lyra admitted.

"But it explains too much."

Demi nodded.

"And Tara sees things before they happen."

Sandi crossed her arms.

"The sketches aren't normal."

"They look like they're from the creatures' point of view."

Captain Reyes remained thoughtful.

Then Viv stepped forward.

"We think the butterflies marked people."

The captain looked toward her.

Viv continued.

"And maybe the marked people are somehow connected."

"Connected how?" Reyes asked.

Viv hesitated.

Then spoke quietly.

"Maybe the aliens can see through them."

The words hung heavily in the air.

Nobody liked hearing them out loud.

Captain Reyes' face remained unreadable.

Then he looked at Tara.

"What do you think?"

Tara lowered her eyes.

For several seconds she said nothing.

When she finally spoke, her voice was barely audible.

"I think they're right."

Nobody interrupted.

Tara swallowed.

"When my eyes glow..."

Her fingers tightened around her sleeve.

"It feels like something opens."

The captain's expression softened.

"And during the attack?"

"I wasn't really there."

The confession hurt to say.

"I could see things."

"What things?"

"The creatures."

The group fell silent.

Tara stared at the ground.

Then she whispered:

"I think they saw us too."

Nobody spoke.

Even the wind seemed to disappear.

Finally Tara looked up.

Her eyes were full of guilt.

"Maybe I shouldn't come on the mission."

The girls immediately looked toward her.

"Tara—"

"No."

She shook her head.

"If the aliens can use me..."

Her voice cracked slightly.

"Then I might put everyone in danger."

Lyra immediately stepped forward.

"That's not your fault."

"But what if—"

"What if nothing?" Demi interrupted.

"Tara—"

"No, listen."

Tara looked toward Captain Reyes.

"They could use me."

"Maybe they should."

The captain frowned.

"Maybe they should use me as bait."

The words stunned everyone.

Viv's eyes widened.

"Tara, no."

"If they follow me—"

"No."

Captain Reyes' voice cut through the conversation instantly.

The firmness surprised everyone.

The captain stepped closer.

"Tara."

She looked up.

"Look at me. Slowly she did. For a moment the stern military officer disappeared. What remained was someone genuinely concerned. "You are not bait." "Nobody spoke." "You are not a weapon." "The

captain's voice remained calm. "And you are certainly not something we're going to sacrifice." Tara looked away. "But if I'm dangerous—" "You're a student." His answer came immediately. "A frightened student who's carrying something she never asked for." The girls fell silent. Captain Reyes continued. "You didn't choose this." "No." "You didn't ask for it." Tara shook her head. "No." "Then stop blaming yourself." The words hit harder than she expected. For a moment she couldn't answer. Viv moved beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "See?" Viv said softly. "We've been trying to tell you that." Sandi nodded. "We're not leaving you behind." "Ever," Demi added. Lyra smiled. "You're stuck with us." For the first time all evening, a tiny smile appeared on Tara's face. Only for a second. But it was there. Captain Reyes noticed. Then he reached into one of his jacket pockets. After a moment he pulled out a folded black cloth. A bandana. Old. Worn. The edges were slightly faded. He held it out toward Tara. She looked confused. "What is it?" The captain smiled faintly. "Wrap this around your eyes. If you can't see them, maybe they can't see you." "I've kept this since I was a young soldier. Use it, I carried this during my first deployment." The girls looked surprised. Reyes unfolded it carefully. "When I was scared, I used to keep it with me." Viv blinked. "You got scared?" The captain laughed. "More times than I'd like to admit." The girls looked genuinely shocked. Even Tara looked surprised. Captain Reyes handed the bandana to her. "It's nothing special." Tara carefully accepted it. "But sometimes having something to hold onto helps." She looked down at the cloth. Then back at him. "You really think I should come?" The captain nodded. Without hesitation. "Absolutely." The answer surprised her. "Why?" Captain Reyes smiled. "Because brave people don't stop being brave when they're afraid." The garden became quiet. "And because," he added, "I trust you." Tara stared at him. For the first time since the city attack, the fear inside her chest felt a little smaller. Not gone. But smaller. And as her friends gathered around her beneath the academy lights, she realized something. For the first time since the butterflies appeared... She wasn't carrying the burden alone.

The morning after the plan was finalized, the students gathered at the loading dock behind the academy. The trucks were lined up, their engines humming quietly as soldiers checked equipment. The atmosphere was tense—fewer students now, most of the other academies had suffered heavy losses. But Elysian Academy remained a beacon, still standing. Captain Reyes called them to attention. "We're moving out," he said, his voice steady but serious. "We're linking the sirens from the city to the academy base, and we'll use them to draw the aliens out. But we need every hand we have." Tara stepped forward, determined, despite her own fears. Lyra stayed close, her hand subtly on Tara's shoulder. Viv, always practical, began organizing supplies with a few of the other students. "Captain," Viv asked as they boarded the truck, "are you sure this plan will work?" Reyes nodded. "We'll make it work. And I know you'll be strong." As the convoy moved, the sirens echoed faintly in the distance, a strange, eerie tune. As they crossed the town, the streets were dark—many shops closed, a hush over the city. They passed by boarded-up windows, ghostly silence everywhere. Viv leaned forward. "This feels like a ghost town." Lyra glanced at Tara, who stared out the window, lost in her own thoughts. As the truck pulled closer to the military base, the sirens grew louder, and a strange tension filled the air—like the calm before a storm. Tara gripped the bandana in her hand as if it were a lifeline. Viv leaned over, whispering, "Tara, you're not alone in this." soon all the students were out from the trucks, the students from every surviving academy gathered together. Elysian Academy. Northwind Academy. Evergreen Academy. Ravencrest Academy where the Elysian academy basketball teams rivals were from and lastly the Starlake Academy. The surviving cadets.

The remaining military recruits. Everyone. Captain Reyes stood on top of a truck and addressed the crowd. "This operation will take several days." The chatter immediately stopped. "We are establishing a siren network across the city." A map appeared on a portable screen. Red lines stretched from the city outskirts all the way toward the military base. "Our goal is simple." He pointed toward the final marker. "We create a path." "A path the creatures will follow." The students exchanged nervous looks. Captain Reyes continued. "If this succeeds, every active creature in this region will be drawn toward the military base." Raiden folded his arms. "And then we burn the place down." Captain Reyes nodded. "Exactly." The crowd grew quiet. Nobody enjoyed hearing it. But everyone knew what was at stake. Tara managed to control her mind and vision covering her eyes from the bandana whenever she feels like it's unsafe. The work began immediately.

Students split into dozens of teams. Every group was assigned a section of the city. Some installed sirens. Others repaired power lines. Others connected generators. Others reinforced damaged roads. For the first time since the invasion began, students from rival academies worked side by side. The Ravencrest academy. Even the Starlake academy basketball team. Kai couldn't help smiling when he spotted them. Their captain, Mason Hart, noticed. "Something funny?" Kai shrugged. "Never thought I'd see you carrying cables." Mason rolled his eyes. "Never thought I'd see you useful." Several nearby students laughed. Noah nearly dropped a toolbox. "Still arguing." "Good," Raiden said. "Means the world hasn't completely ended."

Across the city, Olivia stood on top of a ladder connecting a junction box. A student from Evergreen Academy steadied the ladder. "Careful." "I'm fine." "You said that five minutes ago." "I was also fine five minutes ago." Nearby, students from Raven Academy pulled electrical cables through an abandoned storefront. Others mounted sirens on rooftops. The entire city seemed alive again. Busy. Purposeful. Determined.

Meanwhile, Lyra, Viv, Tara, Demi, and Sandi worked near one of the largest intersections. Military engineers had assigned them to help install a major siren tower. The structure stood nearly twenty feet tall. Soldiers climbed it while students organized equipment below. Lyra wiped sweat from her forehead. "I never want to see another wrench again." Demi laughed. "It's been one day." "It feels like ten." Nearby, Viv giggled. Tara quietly helped connect cables. For once, she looked calmer. Not normal. But calmer. The black bandana Captain Reyes had given her remained tied around her wrist. Every now and then her fingers brushed against it. The days passed. One. Two. Three. The siren network slowly expanded. Street by street. Building by building. Intersection by intersection. Students from different academies began getting to know one another. The old rivalries seemed less important now. Meals were shared. Stories were exchanged. Friendships formed. Even Mason Hart's Starlake team eventually stopped arguing with Kai's group. Mostly.

EVER SINCE THE BUTTERFLIES APPEARED

On the fourth day, Captain Reyes inspected the completed sections. The students gathered around him. Behind them, dozens of sirens stood atop buildings and poles throughout the city. The network stretched for miles. Dr. Chen studied her tablet. Then smiled. "It's ready." A wave of excitement spread through the crowd. Students looked around at everything they had built. Together. Not soldiers. Not engineers. Students. And somehow they had done it. Captain Reyes looked across the city. For the first time in a long while, there was hope in his eyes. "Good work." The students straightened. The captain rarely gave compliments. Which made them matter. "We've spent months reacting." His gaze swept across the gathered academies. "Running." "Hiding." "Surviving." He pointed toward the siren

network."Now we're finally doing something else."The students followed his gaze."What?" Noah asked.Captain Reyes smiled faintly."Hunting."The word sent a chill through the crowd.Not fear. Something else.Because for the first time since the butterflies appeared...Humanity wasn't waiting for the aliens. The aliens were about to walk into a trap.

That evening, the convoy returned to the military base.

The setting sun painted the sky orange as trucks rolled through the gates.

The students were exhausted.

Four days of hauling cables, climbing rooftops, installing sirens, and repairing power lines had left everyone sore.

Yet there was a different feeling in the air now.

Hope.

For the first time in months, they had a plan.

The base itself looked completely different from when they had first arrived.

Fuel tanks had been moved.

Protective barriers had been dismantled.

The survived soldiers were everywhere.

And in the center of the base, military teams were installing massive fire systems.

Rows of fuel lines stretched across the compound.

Large tanks stood near the perimeter.

Everything was being prepared for the final stage of the operation.

The trap.

"Okay."

Viv dropped onto a crate.

"My arms no longer belong to me."

Several students laughed.

Nearby, Kai collapsed onto another crate.

"My legs resigned three days ago."

"They sent a formal letter," Noah added.

"They did."

Raiden rolled his eyes.

"You two are ridiculous."

"You're just jealous because we're funny."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are."

Even Raiden couldn't completely hide a smile.

Across the yard, students from Northwind Academy were helping soldiers connect ignition systems.

Others from Evergreen Academy carried equipment.

Members of the Starlake basketball team worked beside Stark Academy students.

The rivalries had almost disappeared.

Almost.

Mason Hart walked past Kai carrying a toolbox.

Kai immediately pointed.

"Look everyone."

Mason groaned.

"No."

"The mighty basketball captain has become an electrician."

Several students burst out laughing.

Mason looked genuinely offended.

"I regret helping humanity."

"Too late now."

Meanwhile, Tara sat quietly on the edge of a concrete barrier.

The sounds of the base surrounded her.

Soldiers shouting instructions.

Generators humming.

Students talking.

Tools clanging.

Yet her attention remained fixed on the growing network of fuel lines.

A strange feeling sat heavily in her chest.

Captain Reyes noticed.

Of course he noticed.

He always seemed to.

The captain approached slowly.

"Mind if I sit?"

Tara looked surprised.

Then nodded.

The captain sat beside her.

For a few moments neither spoke.

They simply watched the activity around the base.

Finally Tara broke the silence.

"Do you think it'll work?"

Reyes looked toward the fuel tanks.

"I hope so."

Tara lowered her gaze.

"That's not what I asked."

The captain smiled faintly.

"No."

"It isn't."

The silence returned.

Then Tara asked the question that had been bothering her for days.

"Do you think we'll survive this?"

The sounds of the base seemed to fade.

Captain Reyes took longer to answer this time.

Long enough that Tara thought he might not answer at all.

Finally he spoke.

"I don't know."

Tara nodded slightly.

She appreciated that he didn't lie.

The captain continued.

"Anybody who tells you they know the outcome is either lying or a fool."

A small laugh escaped Tara. "A fool?" "Usually both." That earned another tiny smile. Then Tara looked back toward the fuel tanks. "What if everything goes wrong?" Captain Reyes folded his arms. "Then we'll adapt." "And if we can't?" The captain was quiet.

Then he looked directly at her. "Tara." She met his gaze. "You know what I've learned after all these years?" "What?" "Most people think bravery means not being afraid." Tara listened carefully. "But that's not true." The captain looked toward the students. Kai. Noah. Viv. Lyra. Demi. Sandi. All of them laughing despite everything. "Bravery is being terrified and continuing anyway." Tara followed his gaze. Her friends looked exhausted. Yet they were still smiling. Still helping. Still trying. The realization settled quietly inside her. A familiar voice interrupted them. "Captain." Viv appeared carrying two bottles of water. She handed one to Tara. Then one to Reyes. "You're both being suspiciously serious." Captain Reyes laughed. "That's because we're having a serious conversation." "Well stop." The captain raised an eyebrow. "Stop?" Viv nodded confidently. "We spent four days building the world's largest alien trap." "Technically not the world's largest." Viv pointed at him. "That's exactly why nobody invites you to fun conversations." Tara laughed. A real laugh this time. Captain Reyes shook his head. "I walked right into that one." "Yes." Viv sat down beside Tara. "Anyway." She gestured toward the base. "Look at this." They did. Students from every academy moved through the compound. Working together. Talking together. Laughing together. Even after everything they had lost. Viv smiled. "You know what I think?" Nobody answered. Because Viv usually answered her own questions. "I think the aliens made a huge mistake." Tara looked at her. Viv pointed toward the students. "They thought we'd panic." She pointed toward the siren maps. "We built a city-wide network." Then toward the fuel systems. "And now we're literally building a giant trap." Captain Reyes chuckled. "When you say it like that..." "I'm right." "You usually think you're right." "I usually am." That earned groans from nearby students. Even Noah shouted from across the yard. "She's

impossible!""Thank you!""That wasn't a compliment!"The laughter spread through the compound.For a few moments, the fear disappeared.Not completely.But enough.The students sat together beneath the fading evening sky.Tomorrow the final preparations would begin.Tomorrow they would test everything.Tomorrow the trap would be ready.And as Tara sat beside Captain Reyes and her friends, watching the lights of the military base flicker to life, she realized something.For the first time since the butterflies appeared...She genuinely believed they had a chance.

Inside the military base, the siren system stood complete—a web of wires, towers, and fuel lines all anchored in the base yard. The students, still bruised and tired, assembled in a tight circle near the control panel. Captain Reyes stood at the center, “I know we’re scared,” he began, “but you’ve all built this network, and you’ve taken back control of this city. Before we set the sirens off, I want us to make a promise to each other.” “We make this promise,” Viv said, her voice steady. “No matter what happens, we have each other. We don’t give up. And if something happens—if we don’t all make it back—we remember why we fought, for each other.” Sandi nodded, squeezing Tara’s hand. Demi, normally so quiet, spoke up next. “We’ll stay together. We’ll keep each other safe.” Tara swallowed hard. “If I don’t make it,” she whispered, “please don’t see me as a liability. I don’t want you all to be in danger.” Captain Reyes stepped closer, his hand resting gently on Tara’s shoulder. “You’re not a liability,” he said firmly. “You’re stronger than you think. We need your courage now more than ever.” As the sky darkened, the students held hands in a circle. Giselle, notebook in hand, closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “We’ll be brave,” she whispered. Viv nodded. “We’ll survive this. All of us.” Viv tapped Tara’s shoulder. “We’re really doing this,” Viv whispered, her breath visible in the air. Tara nodded, fingers brushing the bandana around her wrist. She didn’t say much; she kept her eyes low, still unsure if she’d be seen by the aliens. Across the circle, Giselle raised her voice. “We all worked so hard,” she said, adjusting her glasses, her eyes bright with determination. “We can’t let fear stop us now.” Olivia nodded, standing tall beside Valentina. “We promised, no matter what. We stick together.” Captain Reyes raised a hand. “Before we activate the sirens, I want us to remember one thing: the fire is just as important. Once we ignite it, there’s no turning back.” He looked directly at Tara. “You’ve been brave every step. If this works, it’s because of people like you.” The students huddled closer together as Captain Reyes climbed onto a crate, his face stern but filled with something deeper care.

“now again my students I need you all to listen carefully,” captain Reyes began, his voice cutting through the crisp air and for the first time his voice filled with care and love for the students . “We have one more step. There’s a safe base—far from the city. It’s separate, hidden, and your families are there.”

A wave of shock rippled through the group. Viv’s eyes widened. “Our parents?”

Captain Reyes nodded solemnly. “Yes. They were moved few weeks ago, but it wasn't quiet safe at the moment so we didn't wanted to send you I'm sorry for hiding that but that was for your own good. And don't worry every parents and the family of these students here are there at the safe base all protected” there was a pause "even the families of the students we lost on our way back. However, we have come this far there is only one step ahead, i hope we all will get to be there..at the safe base so as for now let us focus on the plan" Tara looked stunned. “So... once the fire begins, we get into the trucks and head there?” Reyes nodded again. “Exactly. But the risks are high. Not all of us may make it. The trucks will leave as soon as the sirens sound. You’ll be following me, and once we reach the base, you’ll see your families waiting.” Giselle adjusted her glasses, her brow furrowed. “But what if the aliens follow us?” Raiden spoke up. “Then we fight. We hold the line until everyone is safe.” Viv put a hand on Tara’s arm. “You’ll be safe, Tara. We’ll all get there together.” Tara took a shaky breath. “I just didn’t know they were waiting. I didn’t know they were safe.” Captain Reyes smiled

sadly. “They are. And you will be too. Once this is over, we’ll get you all to safety.” The students exchanged wide-eyed glances as the plan settled in. They didn’t know how many would survive, but they knew that their families, waiting at the safe base, were a beacon pulling them forward. And so, with heavy hearts, they took their places, Captain Reyes nodded. “All right. Viv, flip the switch.” Viv stepped forward, her fingers trembling as she turned the key. The sirens blared, and in the distance, the fire systems roared to life. The city held its breath, and so did they.

“They’re coming,” she gasped, her voice barely a whisper, but it was enough. Everyone looked at her, the circle of students tightening as the sirens grew louder. Viv’s face paled as she grabbed Tara’s arm. “What do you see?”

Tara shook her head, but the air around them vibrated. In the distance, blue flickers moved between the buildings—tendrils, like shadows threading through the streets. The first alien came at twilight, a dark wisp slipping over the fence line. The sirens wavered, still struggling to hold their ground, as the creature twisted inside the base, tendrils flickering in the smoke. A student shouted from the far side of the yard, but it was too late; the alien lunged, slicing across a cadet’s arm with a razor-thin tendril. Screams erupted as more students scattered, but the alien kept moving, drawn to the siren’s call.

Captain Reyes barked an order. “Get to the fire switches! Everyone, grab your weapons—stay together!” They scrambled toward the control panel. Olivia, standing by the switch, looked back at Valentina. “We’re doing this together,” she said, her voice firm. Raiden gripped his rifle, his knuckles white. Kai stood at his side, eyes sharp, as he watched the street. Viv stayed close to Tara, holding her elbow. “Breathe, Tara. Just breathe.” As they reached the fire switches, the aliens appeared like a storm—dark shapes rushing through the streets, tendrils flaring from their bodies. Tara gasped, her vision splitting; the blue glow in her eyes flared brighter. Lyra immediately stepped forward, pulling the bandana mask across Tara’s eyes, whispering, “Don’t look, Tara. Stay with me.” Captain Reyes raised his arm, giving the signal. “Fire the trap! Now!” Explosions lit up the sky as the fire systems roared, and students opened fire, aiming their weapons at the approaching tendrils. Screams echoed as students fired, some falling, some pulling others back. Viv screamed as a tendril snapped near them, but Raiden grabbed her. “Keep moving!” he shouted, as Kai fired into the dark. And all the while, Tara felt the cold weight of the mark, knowing that her eyes gave them a glimpse of the future—but it was Lyra who kept her anchored, keeping her from being lost in that terrifying blue glow.

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Olivia, her heart pounding, ran toward the side switch. “Increase the volume!” she shouted, her fingers fumbling over the dial. As the sound shot up, a wave of alien screams echoed back, but it only drove them further into a frenzy. Another alien burst through the door, tendrils slicing at a group from Evergreen Academy. Demi screamed as a tendril grazed her side, tearing her jacket, and Sandi, shouting in fury, grabbed a concrete block and heaved it at the creature. It crashed against its fluid body, and the alien staggered.

In the chaos, students ran in all directions. Valentina helped Giselle to her feet, who was clutching her arm in pain. Lyra pulled Tara close, as Tara trembled, still blind behind the bandana. "Stay with me," Lyra whispered. Captain Reyes appeared in the smoke, his voice booming as he rallied them. "Keep moving toward the storage wing! Use the lower tunnels—we can still survive if we stay together!"

As the alien shrieked one floor above them, the students huddled, breathless, waiting for another wave. And somehow, together, they kept going—pushing through fire and fear, determined not to let the aliens win.

Captain Reyes's voice rang out, sharp and urgent. "Fifteen minutes until the fire fully takes hold!" he shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Move now! Get to the trucks! Stick together!"

The students surged forward, some limping, some helping others who were wounded. Tara stumbled, her hand still feeling the cold weight of the bandana over her eyes. Viv kept close, urging her forward, while Kai and Noah helped Raiden, who had twisted his ankle.

They ran down the corridor of the base, the heat rising behind them like a wall. Olivia gasped as flames flickered at the end of the hallway, and Valentina grabbed a door handle, pulling them inside a small classroom. They slammed the door shut just as a wave of heat rolled past.

But the aliens were close. No longer just shadows, they moved like liquid, tendrils slipping through cracks in the ceiling. Kai grabbed a metal rod from a broken desk and smashed the window with a sharp, desperate crack. "Downstairs—now!" he shouted. One by one, they slipped through, hitting the ground floor as the flames licked up the walls behind them.

They kept running, hearts pounding, until they reached a storage room. The door creaked shut, and they collapsed behind it, catching their breath. Tara's eyes were still faintly glowing blue, but Lyra kept the bandana in place, gently but firmly. And outside, the fire crackled, but so did their hope—as long as they stayed together, they could still survive.

A student from starlake academy shouted "guys! We should use the lower tunnels" the others agreed they were trapped from thoughts, fear and death

The heat outside had become almost unbearable. Flames climbed across sections of the military base, casting orange light across the night. The sirens continued to scream from every direction, their sound echoing through the city. Students rushed toward the evacuation trucks. Some were helping the injured. Others were carrying supplies. Everyone was moving. Everyone except Tara. She stopped suddenly. "Tara?" Lyra asked. Tara turned toward the burning buildings. For a brief moment, her eyes seemed distant. Then her expression changed. Fear. "No." Lyra immediately noticed. "What is it?" Tara looked toward the center of the base. "Captain Reyes." The words made everyone freeze. "What about him?" Viv asked. "He's still inside." Tara's voice shook. "And he's not alone." The group stared at her. "I saw him." "You saw him?" Kai asked. Tara nodded. "There are students with him." The realization hit them all at once. Captain Reyes hadn't made it out. Neither had several others. A loud crash echoed somewhere inside the base. Smoke rose into the evening sky. "They're trapped," Tara whispered. For a second nobody spoke. Then Lyra already knew what Tara was thinking. "No." Tara looked at her. "No?" "No." Lyra pointed toward the burning buildings. "You're not seriously thinking about going back in there." Tara's silence answered for her. "Tara." "We can't leave them."

The words came out immediately. Viv groaned. "Oh, she's definitely going." Kai sighed. "Yep." Noah rubbed his face. "I knew this was coming." Tara looked between them. "We can't just leave him." Nobody argued. Because none of them wanted to. Captain Reyes had protected them for months. Over and over again. Now he was trapped. Inside the fire. Inside the alien swarm. And Tara knew she couldn't walk away. Lyra let out a long breath. "I hate this plan." Viv nodded. "Me too." Then both girls stepped forward. "But we're coming." Tara blinked. "What?" Viv rolled her eyes. "You didn't think we'd let you run into a burning military base alone, did you?" "No." "Good." Lyra adjusted her grip on her rifle. "Because we're coming." Kai groaned. "Well, now I have to come." Noah pointed at him. "Exactly." The two boys stepped forward. Tara couldn't help smiling. A small one. But it was there. Behind them, Demi was leaning against one of the trucks, clutching her injured side. She immediately shook her head. "Absolutely not." Viv pointed. "You're injured." "So are you!" "Not enough." Sandi crossed her arms. "She's right." Demi looked annoyed. "I hate when she's right." Giselle adjusted her glasses. "You'll move slower if we all go." For once, even Giselle sounded worried. Raiden stepped forward. "We'll cover you from here." Kai looked at him. "You sure?" Raiden nodded. "Get Reyes." His expression hardened. "We'll make sure nothing reaches you from outside." Around them, students from Northwind, , Evergreen, , Ravenscrest, and Starlake Academy slowly nodded. Some were injured. Some exhausted. But all of them understood. This wasn't a rescue for just one man. This was Captain Reyes. The person who had kept them alive. "We'll hold the line," Mason Hart said. "Just don't take forever." Kai smirked. "No promises." A moment later, Tara, Lyra, Viv, Kai, and Noah sprinted back toward the burning base. Behind them, the others took up defensive positions. Weapons raised. Eyes locked on the darkness beyond the fences. Waiting. Watching. Protecting. The inside of the base was worse. Smoke drifted through the corridors. Emergency lights flashed red. Pieces of the ceiling had collapsed. The distant screams of the sirens echoed through the walls. The group moved carefully. Room by room. Hallway by hallway. Searching. "Tara?" Lyra whispered. "Can you still see him?" Tara closed her eyes briefly. Then nodded. "This way." They followed. Through another corridor. Then another. Past abandoned equipment. Past overturned crates. Until suddenly— "There!" Noah pointed. At the far end of a damaged operations room stood Captain Reyes. Several surviving students were with him. They looked exhausted. Covered in soot. But alive. Captain Reyes turned. For a second he simply stared. Then his eyes widened. "Tara?" The students beside him looked equally shocked. "What are you doing here?" Reyes demanded. Viv pointed accusingly. "Funny." "We were about to ask you the same thing." For the first time all evening, Captain Reyes laughed. A tired laugh. But a real one. Tara ran forward. Before she could stop herself. She threw her arms around him. The captain froze. Completely caught off guard. Then slowly returned the hug. Around them, the other students laughed in relief. Even Noah smiled. Lyra shook her head. "We almost died coming back here." "Good to see you too," Reyes replied. Tara finally stepped back. And for the first time since entering the base, she looked toward the windows. Beyond the smoke. Beyond the walls. Toward the city. Toward the trap. Her eyes widened. The blue glow reflected in them. The aliens were gathering. Hundreds of them. Maybe more. Drawn by the sirens. Drawn toward the fire. And many of them were already burning. Some collapsed. Others stumbled through the flames. The trap was working. Tara smiled. A genuine smile. "The plan is working." Everyone turned toward her. Outside, another wave of fire rolled through the darkness. Alien screams echoed across the city. Tara kept watching. "The plan is actually working." Captain Reyes followed her gaze toward the burning horizon. For the first time in a very long time... Hope appeared on his face. And outside, the gathering and attacks continued.

For a few precious seconds, nobody moved. The relief of finding Captain Reyes alive washed over the room. Even the students who had been trapped with him looked as if they could finally breathe again. Then Kai stepped forward and wrapped an arm around the captain's shoulders. "You're never doing that again." Kai's voice cracked slightly as he pulled Captain Reyes into a hug. The captain

looked completely surprised. Then Noah stepped forward. "Seriously." "You scared us half to death." Captain Reyes opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, Noah hugged him too. The room erupted into relieved laughter. Viv immediately joined. "Move." "Me next." Captain Reyes shook his head. "You kids are impossible." "That's not a no." Viv wrapped her arms around him anyway. The surviving students nearby smiled. Even Lyra stepped forward. "Don't ever do that again." The captain laughed softly. "No promises." "Wrong answer." For a few brief moments, the fear disappeared. They had found him. He was alive. That was all that mattered. Then reality returned. A loud crash echoed somewhere outside. The floor trembled. Smoke drifted through a shattered window. And suddenly everyone remembered where they were. Inside a burning military base. Surrounded by aliens. Captain Reyes' expression changed instantly. "Move." The group immediately followed him. They hurried through damaged hallways and collapsed sections of the base. The smoke grew thicker. The heat intensified. Somewhere outside, the sirens continued their deafening cry. The trap was still working. The aliens were still gathering. And the fire was spreading faster than ever. After several minutes of running, they found a narrow maintenance staircase hidden behind a damaged storage room. "Over here!" One of the surviving cadets pointed. The staircase led downward. A possible escape route. Hope flickered across several faces. "We can make it," Viv breathed. The group started toward the stairs. Then Tara stopped. The familiar blue glow flashed briefly in her eyes. She looked behind them. And froze. The smile vanished from her face. "Tara?" Lyra turned. "What is it?" Tara's voice came out barely above a whisper. "They're coming." Everyone immediately looked back. Far down the corridor. Beyond the smoke. Shapes were moving. Dozens of them. The aliens. Still alive. Still advancing despite the sirens. Their movements were slower. Unsteady. Agitated. But they were coming. And there were a lot of them. Captain Reyes stared. Calculating. Thinking. The students could practically see it happening behind his eyes. The staircase. The aliens. The spreading fire. The sirens. The trap. Everything. If those creatures escaped... Everything they had built. Everything they had sacrificed. Could be lost. The remaining aliens might survive. Spread again. Hunt again. The students outside would never truly be safe. Captain Reyes' jaw tightened. Slowly, a terrible realization settled across his face. And Tara saw it immediately. "**CAPTAIN...**?" The captain didn't answer. Instead, he stepped toward a support mechanism near the staircase entrance. A damaged emergency barrier system. Old. Heavy. Still functioning. His hand moved toward it. "wait what! Captain what are you doing ?." Tara's voice broke. The captain looked at her. For just a moment. Then he pulled the trigger on his rifle. The mechanism exploded. A deafening crash echoed through the corridor. Metal supports collapsed. A massive barrier slammed down between the staircase and the corridor. Dust filled the air. The students jumped back. The route behind them was blocked. The route ahead remained open. But only on their side. For a moment nobody understood. Then they did. And the horror hit them all at once. Tara stared. "No." Viv looked from the barrier to Captain Reyes. Then back again. "No." Lyra's face turned white. "Captain..." Noah took a step forward. "What are you doing?" Captain Reyes stood on the opposite side of the collapsed barrier. Separated from them. The firelight danced across his face. Behind him, distant alien screams echoed through the smoke. "They're too close." Nobody spoke. The realization hurt too much. "You can't." Tara's voice cracked. "You can't do this." The captain smiled sadly. "I have to." "No!" Tara slammed her hands against the barrier. "No!" Tears filled her eyes. "You can't leave us!" Viv was crying too now. "Captain, stop!" Lyra's voice shook. " Even Kai looked terrified. For once, he had no joke. No sarcastic comment. Nothing. "Please." The word escaped quietly. Noah stood frozen beside him. Captain Reyes looked at all of them. Really looked. The girls. The boys. The students he had trained. Protected. Argued with. Believed in. His students. The bravest kids he had ever known. A small smile appeared. "You know..." His voice was softer now. "When this started..." He glanced toward Tara. "I thought I was protecting a bunch of scared children." Tara sobbed. The captain shook his head. "I was wrong." His eyes moved across the group. Viv. Lyra. Noah. Kai. The surviving students behind them. "You are the bravest people I've ever met." His gaze settled on the girls. Especially Tara, Viv, and Lyra. "You girls..." His voice cracked slightly. "You've faced things most soldiers never could." The students

cried openly now. The captain looked through the broken window beside him. Outside, flames climbed into the sky. In the distance, his gaze followed a scene caught through a broken window and it was sure mesmerizing, he could see students from every academy fighting for one another.

Northwind.

Evergreen.

Ravencrest

. Starlake.

Elysian.

Former rivals. Now family. Helping each other. Protecting each other. Standing together. For a moment everything seemed to slow down. And Captain Reyes felt proud. Prouder than he had ever been. Because despite everything the aliens had taken... They had failed to break them. And that meant something. More than any victory. More than any plan. More than any battle. The students remained united. And for the first time since the invasion began... Humanity looked stronger than fear.

The girls cried out, voices cracking, "Stop! Please, don't do this! Jump the barrier— we can't go without you!" The boys echoed their cries, fear tightening in their chests. Kai, Noah, and the others reached desperately toward the barrier, trying to see the captain one last time.

Captain Reyes took a deep breath, his eyes darting between the smoke-filled corridors. Through a small gap in the barrier, he caught glimpses of the alien movement, flickers of dark shapes weaving through the fire. He looked straight into Lyra's eyes, his face etched with pain.

"Lyra," he said, his voice cracking, "there's a button. Outside, near the training building. If you press it, the entire place goes up in flames. It will take the aliens with it." He looked at Lyra, his gaze sharp, and his voice broke slightly. "Lyra, you need to press it. Don't think about me— it's the only way. Please."

Lyra stared, her throat tightening. She wanted to nod, but her body froze. The captain then looked into each of the boys' eyes—Kai, Noah, and the others—his plea unmistakable.

"Please," he mouthed, and the boys understood instantly. They stepped forward, gently urging the girls back.

Tara's face crumpled, tears streaming down as she screamed, "You can't leave us like this!"

Viv clung to Lyra, tears choking her words. Noah's jaw clenched, every muscle in his body tense with fear.

Captain Reyes stepped back, his vision blurred by tears for the first time since his days in the military. He gazed at them one last time and whispered, "You are the best children I could never have." The words hung heavy in the air as he backed away. The boys pulled the girls away, the gunfire ringing faintly in the background. The girls cried as the captain ran back into the flames. They could still hear the shots, each one tearing into the evening, each one an echo of his courage. And for the first time, Tara saw him cry—a soldier, a protector, a father figure—and she knew he had given everything.

Captain Reyes stood amidst the chaos, his rifle still smoking from the last shots. His breaths were ragged, and he leaned against a cracked wall, exhaustion heavy in every movement. He wiped sweat from his brow, and for a moment, he closed his eyes—admitting, if only to himself, that he was tired.

He had found a small storage room, a place reinforced by thick concrete, where a flicker of hope remained. He knew it was a risk, Captain Reyes sank to his knees, the heat pressing in all around him. Alone in the cramped room, he leaned against the door, every muscle aching. The sirens still screamed outside, but inside, a suffocating silence settled. He closed his eyes, knowing this was his last stand. And he could sense it—an even larger wave of aliens was coming, but just a small number, he could handle. They would die in the explosion he was certain of.

The heavy metal door slammed shut. Captain Reyes locked it from the inside. For a moment, he simply stood there. Alone. The sounds of the students' voices echoed faintly from beyond the barrier. Then slowly... Those voices faded. Their footsteps disappeared. And silence settled over the room. Captain Reyes leaned back against the locked door and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. Exhaustion washed over him. Through a broken section of the wall, he could see the evening sky. Orange. Red. Beautiful. The flames outside painted the clouds in shifting colors. For a few seconds, he allowed himself to simply watch. Then the distant screams of the aliens echoed through the corridors once more. And Captain Reyes closed his eyes. On the other hand . The students hurried down the narrow maintenance staircase. Nobody spoke. Nobody could. The only sounds were their footsteps and the distant wail of the sirens above. Tara stumbled. Lyra immediately caught her arm. "Tara." Tara didn't answer. Her eyes were red. Tears still streamed down her face. Behind them, Viv wiped her cheeks angrily. "I hate him." Nobody replied. Viv's voice cracked. "I seriously hate him." Kai looked down. "No, you don't." "Yes, I do." Her words came out shaky. "He always does this." Nobody argued. Because they knew exactly what she meant. Captain Reyes always put himself last. Always. The staircase seemed endless. Down. Down. Down. Away from him. Away from the fire. Away from the smoke. Every step hurt. Every step felt wrong. Eventually Noah spoke. "We'll come back." His voice was quiet. The group looked at him. "We'll come back for him." Nobody knew if he was saying it for them. Or for himself. But everyone wanted to believe it. Even if they couldn't. Tara lowered her head. "He lied." The group turned toward her. "He told me we'd all make it." Her voice trembled. "He promised." Lyra immediately wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "He was trying to protect you." Tara shook her head. "I don't want him protecting me anymore." That made everyone stop. For a moment, nobody moved. Tara's voice broke completely. "I just want him to come with

us." The words shattered what little composure remained. Viv began crying again. Even Noah looked away. Kai clenched his fists. The surviving students behind them lowered their heads. Because they all felt the same thing. The staircase suddenly felt far too empty. Far too quiet. Far too lonely. Captain Reyes wasn't there. And for the first time since the invasion began... The thought terrified them. Finally, the staircase opened into a lower service tunnel. Cold air rushed toward them. The tunnel stretched ahead into darkness. Their escape route. Their way out. But nobody moved immediately. They simply stood there. Looking back toward the staircase. Toward the smoke. Toward the man they had left behind. And none of them could shake the feeling that something important had just changed forever.

The tunnel felt endless. Nobody spoke. Nobody wanted to. The only sounds were their footsteps and the distant screams of the sirens above. "Tara." Viv's voice trembled. "Close your eyes." Tara looked at her. "The aliens." Viv swallowed. Lyra immediately understood. "Close them." For once, Tara didn't argue. Slowly, she shut her eyes. Lyra took her hand. "I've got you." The group continued forward. Step by step. Through smoke. Through darkness. Through grief. Eventually, a faint glow appeared ahead. The exit. Hope surged through the group. "We're almost there," Noah said. The students broke into a run. They pushed through the final doorway and emerged outside. Heat blasted against them. The fire had spread across large sections of the base. Burning debris drifted through the air. The evacuation area looked nothing like it had before. The ground was scattered with abandoned equipment. Damaged vehicles. Signs of the desperate battle that had taken place. Several fallen cadets and students lay motionless where the fighting had happened. Some wore Elysian Academy uniforms. Others belonged to the neighboring academies. For a moment, everyone froze. The reality of the invasion hit them all over again. These had been classmates. Friends. People they had trained beside. People who had laughed with them only days ago. Viv lowered her head. Nobody said anything. There were no words left. Then suddenly— "Tara!" "Demi!" The familiar voices made everyone look up. Near one of the outdoor dining shelters where students used to eat during training, a group of survivors rushed toward them. Demi. Sandi. Raiden. Giselle. Valentina. And several of their other classmates. All alive. All injured. But alive. "Tara!" Lyra practically dragged Tara toward them. The moment they reached each other, the girls collapsed into a tight hug. Nobody cared about appearances anymore. Nobody cared who saw. They simply held each other. Crying. Laughing. Relieved. "We thought you were dead," Valentina whispered. "So did we," Viv admitted. Sandi wiped tears from her face. Demi immediately noticed something. "Why are Tara's eyes closed?" Lyra exchanged a glance with Viv. "We'll explain later." Raiden frowned. "Where's Captain Reyes?" The question hit like a punch. The smiles disappeared instantly. Nobody answered. Kai looked away. Noah clenched his jaw. And suddenly everyone understood. "No..." Giselle's voice was barely a whisper. "No." Noah nodded slowly. The silence that followed was unbearable. Several students began crying again. Even some of the older cadets lowered their heads. In the distance, the burning base continued to roar. And somewhere inside it, alien screams echoed through the evening. The trap was working. But it came with a cost. Kai finally straightened. His eyes were red. His voice was shaking. But determined. "We have to keep moving." Nobody responded. "We have orders." The students looked at him. Kai swallowed hard. "Captain Reyes gave us a mission." Noah stepped beside him. "And we're finishing it." Both boys exchanged a glance. Neither wanted to say it. Neither wanted to be the one. But they both knew what came next. The button. The final step. The last part of the plan. Kai pointed toward the training building. "Everyone." "Come with us." The group slowly gathered themselves. Some injured. Some exhausted. Some still crying. But they followed. Because that was what Captain Reyes would have wanted. And because for the first time in months... The end of the nightmare felt within reach. Behind them, the flames continued climbing higher into the evening sky.

Captain Reyes remained motionless long after the students' footsteps disappeared. The room was small. Barely large enough for him. A few old desks. Broken cabinets. A shattered window overlooking part of the base. And one heavy metal door. Locked. Barricaded. For now. The captain slowly stood. His knees protested. Every muscle in his body ached. Smoke drifted through the cracks in the walls. The orange glow of the fire illuminated the room. Outside, the sirens continued their relentless scream. The trap was still working. He moved toward the window. From here he could see sections of the burning base. The training building stood in the distance. Beyond it lay the button. The final step. The last piece of the plan. A timer had already been prepared. Fifteen minutes. Once activated, the entire fuel network surrounding the base would ignite. Everything would burn. Every alien trapped inside. Hopefully. Captain Reyes checked his watch. Time was running out. Then he saw movement. Far below. Dark shapes emerged through the smoke. The remaining aliens. More than he expected. Despite the sirens hurting them. Despite the fire. They kept coming. Slow. Painfully slow. But determined. The creatures staggered forward. Some collapsed into the flames. Others crawled over debris. Still advancing. Still hunting. Captain Reyes frowned. "They just won't quit..." The words escaped quietly. He watched as several creatures reached nearby buildings. One disappeared through a shattered doorway. Another climbed across a wall. Searching. Always searching. And then he noticed something else. The cracks. The gaps. The holes in the structure. His expression darkened. The room suddenly felt much smaller. Because he remembered something. These creatures weren't like people. Locked doors meant almost nothing. They could squeeze through openings no human could use. Slide beneath debris. Slip through broken vents. Flow through narrow gaps. Like liquid. Like shadows. Slowly, Captain Reyes turned around. His eyes scanned the room. Every crack. Every opening. Every weakness. "Damn." Immediately he got to work. He dragged desks across the floor. Pushed filing cabinets against the walls. Stacked chairs against vents. Blocked damaged sections with whatever he could find. The room echoed with scraping metal and splintering wood. Sweat dripped down his forehead. His breathing grew heavier. But he kept working. One opening after another. One weakness after another. Until finally... There was nothing left to move. The room looked like a fortress built by a desperate man. Captain Reyes leaned against a desk. Breathing hard. Waiting. Listening. Several minutes passed. Nothing happened. Only the distant sirens. The roar of fire. And alien screams somewhere beyond the walls. The captain looked toward the training building again. His eyes narrowed. A thought crossed his mind. A dangerous one. Maybe... Just maybe... If he could hold them off. If he could kill enough of them. If the students reached the button in time. If the fire spread the way Dr. Chen predicted. Then perhaps... He could still survive. The training building wasn't impossibly far away. There were emergency ladders outside. Lower rooftops nearby. Possible escape routes. Not good ones. But possible. For the first time in several minutes... A small spark of hope appeared. Captain Reyes smiled faintly. "Wouldn't that be something." The idea sounded ridiculous. But he held onto it anyway. Because hope was all he had left. Then— A scraping sound. Very close. The captain froze. Another scrape. From inside the wall. Then another. From the vent near the ceiling. His hand tightened around his rifle. The room fell silent. A few seconds later something moved behind the barricaded vent. Slowly. Carefully. Searching. Captain Reyes raised his weapon. The hopeful expression disappeared. And the soldier returned. "Come on then." His voice was calm. Steady. Ready. Outside, the fire continued spreading across the base. And somewhere in the distance, his students were moving toward the training building. Toward the button. Toward the final stage of the plan. While Captain Reyes prepared himself for whatever came through those walls first.

The first tendril slipped through a crack near the ceiling. Captain Reyes saw it immediately. He raised his rifle. Bang. The creature dropped before it could fully enter. Another appeared through a broken vent. Bang. It fell. Then another. And another. The aliens kept coming. Squeezing through gaps. Sliding beneath broken furniture. Emerging from places no living thing should have been able to fit

through. Each time, Captain Reyes fired. Each shot precise. Each shot calm. Years of training guiding every movement. The room echoed with gunfire. Smoke filled the air. Alien screams mixed with the distant howl of the sirens. One by one, the creatures fell. But more replaced them. Always more. Captain Reyes checked his magazine. Almost empty. He fired again. Another creature collapsed. Then another. Click. Silence. The rifle was empty. For a brief moment, the captain stared at the weapon. Then he tossed it aside. A tired smile appeared on his face. "Well." He rolled his shoulders. "That lasted longer than I expected." The creatures continued pushing through the cracks. The firelight flickered across the room. Captain Reyes grabbed the nearest metal pipe lying among the debris. His grip tightened. The aliens moved closer. The captain took a step forward. Alone. Exhausted. Outnumbered. Yet somehow still standing. "Come on." His voice remained steady. "I'm not done yet." And came. One after another. The creatures poured through every opening they could find. The barricades shook. The chairs and desks Captain Reyes had stacked earlier were slowly pushed aside. Smoke drifted across the room. The fire outside crackled louder. Captain Reyes tightened his grip on the metal pipe. Then charged. The first creature lunged. The captain swung. The pipe connected with a loud clang. The creature slammed into the wall and dropped motionless. A second came from the side. Reyes dodged. Years of training taking over. He struck again. And again. The room became a blur of movement. Firelight. Smoke. Alien screams. The distant wail of the sirens. Every second felt longer than the last. Eventually, the captain found himself breathing heavily. His arms ached. His uniform was covered in dust and ash. But he was still standing. And several creatures now lay motionless across the floor. For a brief moment, there was silence. Captain Reyes leaned against a desk. Trying to catch his breath. Outside the shattered window, he could see the training building through the smoke. Somewhere out there... Tara. Lyra. Viv. Kai. Noah. Demi. Sandi. Raiden. Giselle. Valentina. And all of the surviving students were moving toward the button. Toward the final step of the plan. A small smile appeared. "Come on, kids." His voice was barely above a whisper. "Just a little longer." Then another scrape echoed from inside the wall. More movement. More creatures. Captain Reyes slowly straightened. His body protested. Every muscle hurt. But he ignored it. The captain picked up the metal pipe once more. Firelight reflected in his eyes. And as another shadow emerged through the smoke... He stepped forward to meet it. A faint laugh escaped him. "You picked the wrong room." And once again, he stepped forward.

The Last Order

The training building was eerily quiet, the button sitting like a beacon in the center of the room. Kai led the group forward, each step heavy with grief. In front of them, large windows framed the burning base. The training building was silent. Far too silent. The moment the students stepped inside, the weight of everything crashed down on them. Nobody spoke. Nobody knew what to say. The room was illuminated by the orange glow pouring through the massive windows overlooking the military base. Outside, the fire continued to spread. The sirens still screamed across the city. And in the center of the room sat the button. The final step. The end of the plan. The thing Captain Reyes had trusted them to do. Yet none of them moved toward it. Not yet. Because every pair of eyes was fixed on the burning base beyond the glass. "Tara..." Lyra whispered. Tara, eyes still shut, sensed something shift inside her slowly, Tara opened her eyes. For the first time, she saw him—not in the alien haze, but clearly, as though her mind had woken up. The last alien vision faded as she opened her eyes just enough to see that room, and there, across the fire for the first time since leaving the staircase, the blue glow was gone. Her vision was her own again. No alien thoughts. No strange connections. Just her and what she saw made her freeze. Beyond the flames, beyond the smoke, she

could see the building, the room, the window, and standing inside it... Captain Reyes. Alive. A collective gasp filled the room. "Captain..." Viv breathed. The students rushed toward the windows—Noah, Kai, Lyra, Demi, Sandi, Raiden, Giselle, Valentina, the surviving cadets, and the students from Northwind, Evergreen, Starlake, Ravenscrest. Everyone. For a moment, nobody cared about rival schools. Nobody cared about old arguments. They were just students. The students pressed against the window, hands reaching, tears streaming as they watched. Watching the person who had protected them for months. Watching the person who had become family. And maybe this is the last time. Far away, through the smoke, Captain Reyes looked impossibly small. Yet somehow everyone recognized him immediately. He was leaning against the wall, exhausted, covered in soot. His rifle useless, he dodged and stumbled, tendrils slicing through his jacket, leaving thin cuts on his skin. Yet still, he stayed on his feet, fighting. Still standing. Still fighting. Still refusing to give up. Tara pressed her hand against the glass. "Captain..." Her voice broke. As though sensing them, Captain Reyes turned toward the window, toward the training building, toward them. For a moment everything seemed to stop—the fire, the sirens, the fear, everything. And then he smiled. A tired smile. The same smile he always gave whenever one of them succeeded during training. The same smile he gave when Viv made a terrible joke. The same smile he gave when Kai got into trouble. The same smile he gave when Noah doubted himself. The same smile he gave when Tara thought she wasn't strong enough. The students immediately started crying again because they knew. They all knew. He wasn't smiling because he was okay. He was smiling because he was proud. Viv buried her face in her hands. "No." Her shoulders shook. "No no no no..." Demi wrapped an arm around her, crying too. Lyra couldn't stop the tears running down her face. Even Raiden looked away. Noah stood frozen. Completely frozen. Kai stared at the window, unable to move, unable to breathe. Far away, Captain Reyes lifted a hand—a simple gesture, a wave. The students broke. Tara's knees almost gave out. "He knows," she whispered, "he knows we're here." The captain lowered his hand, then pointed toward the button. Silence filled the room. Nobody moved. Nobody wanted to understand what he was asking. But they did. Of course they did. Kai's eyes immediately filled with tears. "No." His voice cracked. "No." Noah looked down, his fists trembling. The button sat only a few feet away, yet it felt impossible to reach because pressing it would mean accepting reality, accepting what Captain Reyes had chosen. Outside, another section of the base collapsed. The fire surged higher. Alien screams echoed across the night. The trap was working. The plan was working, exactly as Captain Reyes intended. Yet nobody felt victorious because the cost stood right in front of them, watching, waiting, trusting them. Captain Reyes pointed toward the button again, more firmly this time, his expression serious—the expression of a captain giving an order, even now, even here, still protecting them, still leading them. Tara felt fresh tears spill down her face. She remembered the first day she met him, the first lesson, the first time he encouraged her, the bandana, the talks, the training, the way he always noticed when someone was struggling, the way he never left anyone behind. Her chest hurt because for the first time she realized something: Captain Reyes hadn't just been their captain; he had become their home, their safety, their constant, and now he was asking them to let him go. Far away, through the flames, Captain Reyes looked at every student gathered in that room—his students, his kids, the ones he had fought for, the ones he had watched grow stronger, the ones who had become brave enough to save each other. A proud smile appeared once more, and this time, every single student understood exactly what it meant. He wasn't asking them to save him; he was asking them to save everyone else. The room fell silent. Only the sirens remained. Only the fire. Only the distant cries of the aliens trapped inside the burning base. And standing before the button, Kai slowly lowered his head because he finally understood the order Captain Reyes had given them, and understanding it hurt more than anything.

Nobody wanted to move. Nobody wanted to be the one. The button sat in the middle of the room, waiting, silent, final. Kai stared at it. Noah stared at it. Tara could barely see through her tears. Lyra held onto Viv's arm. Demi stood beside Sandi. Raiden lowered his head. Giselle wiped her eyes. Valentina looked away from the window, unable to bear it any longer. Around them stood students from every academy—Northwind, Evergreen, Starlake, Ravenscrest, Elysian—the surviving cadets, the injured, the exhausted, the frightened. Every one of them had lost someone, and every one of them had been saved by the man standing in that burning room. Far beyond the glass, Captain Reyes continued fighting. Then suddenly—a dark shape lunged from the smoke. Several students screamed. The creature leapt toward him. Captain Reyes barely dodged, the alien crashing into a wall behind him. Another appeared. Then another. More shapes emerged from the smoke-filled corridors. The students gasped. There were too many. Far too many. "Captain!" Viv cried, as if he could hear her, as if somehow her voice could reach him. The captain stumbled backward, still standing, still fighting, still refusing to fall. But everyone could see the truth: he couldn't hold them forever, not alone, not anymore. Tears streamed down faces throughout the room. Some cadets openly cried. Several students from the other academies looked away, unable to watch, unable to accept what was happening. Tara pressed both hands against the glass. "No..." Her voice broke. "No..." The flames outside climbed higher. The timer was almost finished. Time was running out, and Captain Reyes knew it. Far away, through the smoke, he looked toward them one final time—toward every student, every cadet, every survivor, the people he had protected, the people he had believed in. Slowly... he nodded. Not an order this time. Not just a command. A plea. A thank you. A goodbye. Everything wrapped into one small gesture. The room shattered. Students began sobbing. Even Noah wiped tears from his eyes. Kai's shoulders trembled. Lyra buried her face against Tara's shoulder. Viv couldn't stop crying. None of them wanted this. None of them. But Captain Reyes had already made his choice, and now he was asking them to make theirs. Slowly... Kai stepped forward. Noah moved beside him. For a moment they looked at each other. Neither spoke. Neither needed to. Then Kai placed his hand on the button. Noah placed his hand over his. One by one, others stepped forward—Tara, Lyra, Viv, Demi, Sandi, Raiden, Giselle, Valentina, the cadets, the students from every academy. Everyone. Hands overlapping, united, together, just like Captain Reyes had always wanted. Outside, another alien rushed toward him. The captain raised his head and smiled. Not a sad smile. Not a frightened one. A proud one. The smile of a teacher looking at his students one last time. The smile of a captain who knew they would survive. The smile of someone who believed in them until the very end. Tara's vision blurred completely. Yet through the tears she saw it: Captain Reyes, standing tall, surrounded by fire, surrounded by smoke, still smiling. "Thank you..." she whispered. Then together—every student pushed. The button clicked. For a brief moment... nothing happened. The world seemed to hold its breath. The sirens screamed. The fire roared. And far beyond the glass, Captain Reyes never looked away from them, still smiling, still proud, still there. Then the timer reached zero, and the night erupted in light. The students cried out as a brilliant blaze surged across the base. Flames raced through the prepared fuel lines. Building after building vanished behind walls of fire. The shockwave rattled the windows. Smoke and light swallowed everything—the room, the aliens, the burning base, Captain Reyes. Everything disappeared into the blaze. And the last thing the students saw before the fire consumed the horizon... was Captain Reyes smiling at them.

The place turn into flames there is a ringing not the sirens, the sirens have stopped just a ringing that everyone could here hurting their ears..

He's gone..."

And nobody answers.

Because nobody wants to admit it.

The journey to the safe base felt longer than any journey they had ever taken. Four military trucks moved slowly along the damaged road. The first truck carried Tara, Lyra, Viv, Demi, Sandi, Kai, Noah, Raiden, Giselle, Valentina, Olivia, several cadets, and some of their remaining classmates from Elysian Academy. Behind them, three more trucks followed, carrying the surviving students from Northwind Academy, Evergreen Academy, Starlake Academy, Ravencrest Academy, and the remaining cadets and soldiers who had helped during the operation. There weren't many left, not compared to before, but they were there—alive—and that mattered. The convoy moved through the ruined streets, heading toward the safe military base Captain Reyes had told them about, the place where the surviving families had been evacuated, where their parents were waiting, and where Captain Reyes had promised they would reach. The trucks bounced violently over damaged roads, each bump jolting the exhausted students as some winced from injuries while others simply stared blankly out the windows, but nobody complained because nobody had the energy. Tara sat near the back of the truck, Captain Reyes' bandana clutched tightly in her hands; the fabric was stained with soot now, but she refused to let go. Outside the window, smoke still rose into the sky far behind them. The military base was no longer visible, yet everyone knew exactly where it was and exactly who they had left there. The truck hit another pothole, causing the entire vehicle to lurch, and Viv nearly fell sideways. "Ow." Several students looked at her, and for the first time in hours, a few weak smiles appeared. "Still complaining?" Kai asked. Viv wiped her eyes. "Yes." "Good," Noah nodded, "that's normal." A few students chuckled quietly, a laughter that didn't last long but was enough to remind them they were still here. The convoy continued moving through broken roads, past abandoned buildings, and past places that once felt familiar until eventually Lyra broke the silence. "Do you think..." her voice trembled, "do you think our parents are really there?" Several students looked up, as nobody had spoken about it yet—the safe base, their families, and the possibility of seeing them again after everything. Demi nodded first. "He wouldn't lie." Nobody needed to ask who she meant: Captain Reyes. "He said they'd be waiting." Sandi smiled faintly. "Then they're waiting." The truck rattled again, and Giselle adjusted her glasses; for once, she wasn't correcting anyone, wasn't arguing, and wasn't acting annoyed. She simply looked out the window. "He planned everything," her voice was unusually quiet, and the students listened. "The sirens. The evacuation. The safe base. The trucks. He thought of everything." Nobody answered because she was right; even now, even after he was gone, they were still following the path he had prepared for them. Far ahead, one of the cadets driving glanced into the rear-view mirror. The three trucks behind them were still there, still following, filled with students from different academies sitting together—some sleeping from exhaustion, some crying quietly, and some simply staring at the moon and the stars. Months ago they had been rivals; now they were survivors, united by the exact same war. Tara finally looked up. It was night, but golden light spilled across the horizon, bringing the first truly peaceful sunrise they had seen in months—no sirens, no gunfire, no alien screams, just the kind of silence that comes after a storm. Her fingers tightened around the bandana, and suddenly another memory surfaced of Captain Reyes standing in front of the training field, hands on his hips, shouting at everyone to hurry up. The memory made Tara smile through her tears. Across from her, Lyra noticed and then smiled too, and soon Viv was smiling, then Noah, then Kai—small, sad smiles, but real ones, because every single

one of them was remembering something different: a lesson, a joke, a conversation, a moment. Viv looked away from the window. "I still remember when he made us run laps for an hour." A few students looked at her as Viv laughed weakly through her tears. "Because somebody decided it was a good idea to throw water balloons at the cadets." Kai immediately pointed at Noah. "It was him." "What?!" "It was definitely you." "It was not me!" For a brief second, the truck almost felt normal—almost—then the laughter faded because the person who had yelled at them that day wasn't here anymore, and the silence returned. Noah lowered his head. "He always knew when I was lying." Several students nodded. "He somehow always knew." Raiden let out a weak laugh. "He knew everything. That was terrifying." A few smiles appeared—small ones, broken ones, but real. Demi wiped her eyes. "The first day I got injured during training..." her voice cracked, "I thought he'd yell at me." Everyone listened. "But instead he sat beside me for an hour." Demi smiled sadly. "He kept pretending he wasn't worried." Sandi laughed softly. "He was terrible at pretending." The students nodded immediately because that was true; Captain Reyes acted tough, but everyone knew he cared far too much. Across the truck, Giselle adjusted her glasses, her eyes red. "He always made me answer questions." Valentina smiled faintly. "Because you always knew the answers." "I hated it." "No you didn't." "...okay maybe a little." The truck filled with quiet laughter, the kind that only made the sadness hurt more. Eventually everyone's attention shifted toward Tara, who still hadn't said a word, the bandana remaining clutched tightly in her hands. Lyra gently squeezed her arm. "Tara?" For a moment Tara didn't answer, then she looked down at the faded fabric and finally spoke. "He believed in me. He believed in all of us. He never stopped," her voice trembled, "even when we stopped believing in ourselves." More tears rolled down her cheeks, and the students lowered their heads because they knew she was right: Captain Reyes had never given up on them, not once, not ever. Outside the truck, the sun slowly began to rise, stretching golden light across the horizon to bring the first sunrise they had seen without sirens, without gunfire, and without aliens—the first peaceful morning in what felt like forever. Yet none of the students felt happy, not completely, because one seat remained empty, one voice was missing, and one person should have been there telling them to sit properly, telling Kai to stop causing trouble, telling Viv to stop talking over everyone, and telling them they had survived, that they had done well, and that he was proud. Tara looked down at the bandana one final time, then slowly wrapped it around her wrist just like Captain Reyes used to. Lyra noticed and smiled through her tears, and for the first time since the explosion, Tara managed a small smile back because even though he was gone, a part of him would always remain with them in every lesson, every memory, every friendship, and every life he had saved. And as the truck carried the survivors toward an uncertain future, nobody spoke; they simply sat together—classmates, friends, family—remembering the captain who had changed all of them forever, and somehow, Captain Reyes felt close again. The truck hit another bump, but this time nobody complained and nobody cared because somewhere ahead, beyond the mountains and forests, was the safe base, and waiting there were their families—the people they had fought so hard to return to, the people Captain Reyes had promised they would see again. For the first time since the explosion, a tiny spark of hope appeared among the students—not happiness, not yet, but hope—and as the four trucks continued toward the horizon, carrying the last survivors of every academy, the students sat together in silence, watching the bright moon, remembering the captain who had brought them this far, and wondering what waited for them at the end of the road.

DÉJÀ VU....?

Sometime during the journey, the truck grew quiet. One by one, exhaustion finally caught up to them. Noah's head rested against the window. Kai had his arms folded, asleep despite the constant bumps in the road. Demi and Sandi leaned against each other. Giselle had fallen asleep with her glasses slightly crooked. Valentina rested her head against Olivia's shoulder. Even Viv had stopped talking, for once. The truck continued forward beneath the moonlit sky, and slowly... Lyra closed her eyes.

The basketball court was crowded. Students were everywhere. The afternoon sun shone brightly overhead. The sky was blue, perfectly blue. No sirens. No smoke. No aliens. Just laughter. Lyra blinked, then smiled. The court looked exactly as it used to—before everything happened, before the butterflies, before the invasion, before the war. "Tara!" Viv's voice echoed across the court. Lyra turned. Tara sat beneath a tree with a sketchbook balanced on her knees. She looked different; not physically, just happier, the way she used to be. There was no mark on her neck, no fear in her eyes, no burden on her shoulders. She was sketching a smiling girl, and somehow that made Lyra smile too. Nearby, Noah and Raiden burst into laughter. "What did you do?!" Tara looked up. Noah immediately pointed at Raiden. "It was him!" "It was not me!" "It was definitely you!" The two boys sprinted away before Tara could catch them. Lyra laughed. The sound felt strange, like she hadn't laughed properly in forever. Across the court, Demi, Sandi, and Olivia were laughing over something one of their classmates had said. A group of students sat nearby playing cards; among them were Ethan, Chloe, Lily, and a few other classmates. Everyone looked relaxed, happy, alive. Near the benches, Kai was teasing Giselle. "You know, if you smiled once in a while, people wouldn't think you're a robot." Giselle rolled her eyes. "I hope you fail your exams." "See?" Kai grinned. "That's friendship." "That's not friendship." "It absolutely is." Valentina sat nearby, fixing her makeup using a small mirror. "You two argue more than married couples." Kai immediately choked. Several students burst into laughter, and even Giselle looked offended.

Lyra looked around. Everything felt normal, perfect, as if nothing bad had ever happened, as if the world had never changed. And then Viv appeared beside Tara holding a small box. "Macaroon?" Tara immediately reached for one. "Don't mind if I do." Viv looked toward Lyra. "You okay?" Lyra blinked. "Huh?" "You've been staring into space." The girl laughed, then slowly shook her head. "It's weird." "What is?" Lyra looked around at everyone—at her classmates, at the blue sky, at the basketball court, at Tara, at Noah, at Kai, at everyone. Then she smiled. "I had the strangest idea." "What idea?" Lyra laughed. "A dream." Viv raised an eyebrow. "A dream?" "Yeah." Lyra shook her head. "It was ridiculous." "Tell us." Lyra grinned. "There were these glowing butterflies." Viv immediately laughed. "What?" "And aliens." The laughter grew louder. "Aliens?" "Yep." "And we had to fight them." Tara laughed too. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard." "I know," Lyra laughed, "it felt so real though." The group continued laughing, and even Lyra couldn't stop smiling because honestly? The idea sounded impossible, completely impossible.

Then—the ground jolted violently. Everything shook. The basketball court vanished. The laughter disappeared. The sky dissolved, and Lyra's eyes flew open. The truck. The road. The moonlight. Reality. Her smile faded, and the ache in her chest returned instantly. For a moment she just sat there, trying to breathe, trying not to cry. Around her, the others were waking too. Another bump rattled the truck. "What was that?" Noah mumbled sleepily. Kai rubbed his eyes. Viv stretched. Demi yawned. Lyra looked down, then quietly laughed. "What?" Viv asked. Lyra shook her head. "I had a weird dream." Nobody paid much attention. "What happened?" Noah asked. Lyra smiled sadly. "I thought all this were a dream. the butterflies..." Immediately Kai looked up. "And aliens." Viv froze. "And how got Tara marked too?" Demi sat upright. "And Captain Reyes trained us to fight them. all these things felt like a dream?"

The truck fell silent. Lyra slowly looked around. Noah stared at her. Viv stared at her. Kai stared at her. Everyone stared at her. Then Noah quietly said, "Raiden and I were pranking Tara." Lyra blinked. "What?" Demi spoke next. "Sandi and I were laughing near the court." Viv's eyes widened. "I gave Tara a macaroon." Kai pointed toward Giselle. "I was teasing her." Giselle sighed. "You were." Valentina looked up. "I was fixing my makeup." Nobody spoke. The truck suddenly felt very small, very quiet, because piece by piece... everyone completed the dream. The exact same dream, from their own perspective, as if they had all shared the same memory—or perhaps, a glimpse of the life they should have had. For a moment nobody knew what to say. Then Viv wiped her eyes and smiled a sad smile. "I think..." her voice trembled, "I think that's how Captain Reyes would've wanted us to remember things." Nobody answered because deep down... they all thought the same thing. And for the rest of the journey, nobody spoke; they simply sat together beneath the moonlight, holding onto that one perfect afternoon, the one they never truly got to have.

When the convoy finally arrived at the safe military base, nobody moved at first. The students sat in silence as the gates opened. Then they saw them—their families. Hundreds of people waiting beyond the checkpoints; mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents, waiting, hoping, praying. The moment the truck doors opened, the students ran. Tears filled the air as parents rushed forward and children embraced their families, and for the first time in months, many of them felt safe—truly safe. Tara found her family, and so did Lyra, Viv, Demi, Sandi, Kai, Noah, Raiden, Giselle, Valentina, Olivia, and countless others. For a brief moment, the fear disappeared, the war felt distant, the sirens were gone, the aliens were gone, and all that remained were families reunited at last. Yet amid the joy, there was also sorrow because not every family was celebrating. Some stood waiting for children who would never step off those trucks, and some parents searched every face only to realize the one they were looking for wasn't there. The surviving students noticed, and their hearts broke all over again because they remembered every classmate, every cadet, and every friend who had not made it home.

The months that followed were difficult. The country slowly recovered as cities were rebuilt, schools reopened, roads were repaired, and life gradually returned. The government officially announced that all national examinations would be postponed, and students were given time to recover, receive support, and rebuild their lives. Only after the recovery and clearance operations were completed would the examinations be held, and for many students, it was the first time anyone had told them they could finally rest. And so they did.

And of course the sky was clear and normal as before scientists were more alert and did experiments the government apologised for their lack of paying attention. There was no more aliens no more lights and no more butterflies, the best result of their sacrificial Tara's mark was barely visible now as time passes she turned into the cheerful, artist friend she once used to be.

As society rebuilt, memorials were erected across the country. The names of the fallen students and cadets were engraved into stone, ceremonies were held, candles were lit, families gathered, and the nation remembered. People spoke of the bravery shown by students from every academy—Elysian Academy, Northwind Academy, Evergreen Academy, Starlake Academy, Ravencrest Academy, and many others. Stories spread about how students had protected one another regardless of school, background, or rivalry; how they had fought together, how they had survived together, and how some had sacrificed everything for others. The survivors were recognized not as children caught in a disaster, but as heroes who had faced unimaginable circumstances with courage.

But among all the names remembered, one was spoken more than any other: Captain Reyes. The man who had trained them, protected them, and believed in them; the man who stayed behind so others could live. His actions became known throughout the country, articles were written about him, memorials honored him, students spoke of him years later, parents thanked him, teachers admired him, and soldiers saluted his name. To the world, he became a symbol of courage, a hero, but to Tara, Lyra, Viv, Demi, Sandi, Kai, Noah, Raiden, Giselle, Valentina, Olivia, and the classmates who survived... he would always be something more. A mentor, a protector, a captain, and the person who taught them that even in the darkest moments, people could still choose to protect one another. And though the war eventually became history, none of them ever forgot the man who led them through it—Captain Reyes.

Years later, the survivors still kept their promise. No matter how busy life became. No matter how far apart they lived. Once every year, they gathered together. Not because they were forced to. Not because anyone asked them to. But because they wanted to. Because some bonds were stronger than time. And some people were impossible to forget. Years later, the survivors still kept their promise. No matter how busy life became. No matter how far apart they lived. Once every year, they gathered together. Not because they were forced to. Not because anyone asked them to. But because they wanted to. Because some bonds were stronger than time. And some people were impossible to forget. The morning was calm when Tara arrived. Lyra was already there. Viv arrived a few minutes later carrying a box of macarons. "Some things never change," Lyra laughed. Soon Demi and Sandi appeared together. Then Kai and Noah arrived arguing about something neither of them could even remember. Raiden followed behind them, shaking his head. Giselle arrived carrying flowers. Valentina and Olivia came together. One by one, their former classmates joined them—students from Elysian Academy, Northwind Academy, Evergreen Academy, Starlake Academy, Ravencrest Academy—classmates who had once been rivals, classmates who had once fought side by side, now adults, yet somehow still the same. For a moment, it felt like old times: the teasing, the laughter, the familiar voices, the memories. Then they reached the hill, and everything became quiet. At the top stood a memorial, simple, peaceful, overlooking the rebuilt city. Fresh flowers surrounded it, and engraved upon the stone was a name every one of them knew by heart: Captain Reyes. Nobody spoke immediately. They simply stood there, looking at the name, remembering. Tara stepped forward first. Around her wrist was the faded bandana she had kept all those years; the colors had faded, the fabric had worn thin, but she still wore it, just like she always promised herself she would. She carefully placed a bouquet beside the grave, then stepped back. Lyra followed. Then Viv. Then Demi. Sandi. Kai. Noah. Raiden. Giselle. Valentina. Olivia. And all the remaining classmates. Soon flowers covered the memorial—a sea of colors, a sea of memories. The wind gently rustled the grass. For a while, nobody said anything. Then Viv suddenly laughed, a small laugh, and the others looked at her. "You know..." she smiled through tears, "I still think he'd yell at us for standing around doing nothing." That earned a few laughs. Even Kai smiled. "He'd definitely tell Noah to stop being lazy." "I am not lazy." "You absolutely are." "No, I'm not." "You fell asleep during a reunion once." The group laughed, even Noah, the laughter echoing across the hill, warm, familiar, comforting—exactly the kind of laughter Captain Reyes used to enjoy hearing. Tara looked toward the city below: the rebuilt buildings, the busy streets, the peaceful sky, everything they had fought to protect, everything he had sacrificed himself for. Then she looked back at the memorial and smiled—not a sad smile, not anymore, but a grateful one because although Captain Reyes was gone, his lessons remained, his courage remained, his memory remained, and most importantly, the people he had saved remained.

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THE END....?

"Basketball court?" Lyra asked, grabbing her bag. "Obviously," Tara replied. The five friends began heading toward the door. Viv waved at Olivia. "You coming?" Olivia smiled. "In a minute. I promised I'd help Aiden with something." "Have fun being responsible." "I always do." As they left, Noah called after them. "Try not to embarrass yourselves." "No promises," Demi replied. The

classroom slowly emptied. Giselle remained at her desk, studying. Mira continued sketching. Valentina continued fixing her hair. Kai continued scrolling. And beyond the classroom windows, the evening sun illuminated the beautiful grounds of Elysian Academy. Just another normal day. The kind of day nobody bothers remembering. Until it becomes impossible to forget. As Olivia went to help Aiden the group went to the basketball court. Lyra dribbled the ball down the court, her ponytail swaying behind her as she laughed. "Catch me if you can!" "Not a chance!" Tara shouted, sprinting after her. Lyra leaped and sent the ball flying toward the hoop. Swish. The ball dropped cleanly through the net. "Oh, come on!" Demi groaned dramatically. "At this point, we should just hand her the championship trophy." The group burst into laughter. Nearby, Viv caught the ball and spun it on her fingertip before passing it to Sandi. "You know," Viv said with a grin, "when exams are over, the first thing I'm doing is eating the biggest sandwich I can find." "Same!" Sandi replied, dribbling between her legs. "We've been talking about those sandwiches for months." "And fries," Tara added quickly. "Definitely fries," Lyra agreed. The game continued, full of missed shots, lucky baskets, and endless teasing. Every time someone missed the hoop, the others cheered louder than if they had actually scored. The sky slowly shifted from bright blue to shades of orange and pink. A cool breeze drifted through the court, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass from the nearby field. For a moment, everything felt perfect. No exams. No worries. Just five friends racing across the court, laughing until their stomachs hurt. As the ball bounced across the pavement once more, Lyra glanced at the sky. "Promise me something," she said. The others paused. "No matter where we end up after school, let's stay friends." A smile spread across Tara's face. "Deal." One by one, the others agreed. Then Viv grabbed the ball and ran toward the hoop. "Last basket wins!" "HEY!" Demi shouted as everyone took off after her. Their laughter echoed across the quiet school grounds as the sun slipped lower behind the buildings, painting the court in gold. None of them knew that these ordinary afternoons—the games, the jokes, the dreams, and the promises—would soon become memories they would desperately wish they could relive.

Twenty-five years later. The laughter echoed once again. Only this time, it wasn't coming from a basketball court. It came from a wooden lakeside deck overlooking calm blue water. The evening sun reflected across the surface of the lake, turning it gold. A gentle breeze moved through the trees surrounding Lyra's home. The city they had grown up in had changed over the years. New buildings. New roads. New faces. Yet somehow this place still felt familiar. Still felt like home. Lyra stood on the deck holding a tray of drinks. Her hair was streaked with silver now. But her smile remained exactly the same. Below, the lake rippled peacefully. And gathered around a large table were the people who had kept their promise. Tara. Viv. Olivia. Demi. Sandi. And Lyra. Twenty-five years. Twenty-five years since the invasion. Twenty-five years since Elysian Academy. Twenty-five years since they had stood together as students. Yet somehow it felt like yesterday. Viv pointed at Tara. "You still draw." "Of course I still draw." "You used to draw during class." "I still do." "You are a grown woman." "And? I literally have an animation company." The table erupted into laughter. Across from them, Olivia shook her head. "Some things never change." "Nope," Demi agreed. "Thankfully." Sandi smiled as she looked around the table. For a moment, nobody spoke. The setting sun painted the lake in shades of orange. The same colors that once painted the basketball court. The same colors from that afternoon. That ordinary afternoon. The one they never forgot. Lyra leaned back in her chair. "You know..." The others looked up. "I was thinking about that promise." Immediately everyone knew which one. The basketball court. The sunset. The promise. No matter where we end up after school, let's stay friends. Tara smiled softly. "We actually did it." "We did." Viv raised her glass. "Honestly, I didn't think we'd manage it." "me too" Olivia said "That's because you forget birthdays." "I do not." "You absolutely do." More laughter. Warm laughter. Comfortable laughter. The kind that only comes after decades of friendship. The lake shimmered quietly beside them. The world was peaceful. And for a moment, as the sun began to set beyond the water, it almost

felt as though they could hear echoes of younger voices. A basketball bouncing. Friends laughing. Promises being made. The girls sat together watching the sunset. Still friends. Still family. Still keeping a promise made on a basketball court twenty-five years ago. And somewhere in those memories, Elysian Academy remained exactly as they remembered it. Forever painted in gold.

Over the years, each of the friends followed their own path, shaped by that promise they made long ago. Tara's full time job sketching has finally paid off she's an animator now she even got her own company a company which makes thriving animation, breathing life into stories. On the other hand the one who cared for the group like a mother but still the youngest holds the name as Dr. Demi, a dentist. Lyra, always brilliant, became a logistics engineer, crafting efficient supply networks that helped rebuild infrastructure across cities. Viv became a doctor, dedicating herself to healing others. Kai became a successful businessman, leading his own company. Raiden rose to become an Air Force commander, carrying on Captain Reyes' legacy. Sandi became a journalist, her words reaching across the country as she reported on the rebuilding of their nation, never forgetting the truth behind the invasion. Lyra, always brilliant, became a logistics engineer, crafting efficient supply networks that helped rebuild infrastructure across cities. Noah became an architect, designing spaces that inspire. Valentina opened a successful makeup shop, turning beauty into business. Giselle, ever curious, became a zoologist, studying animals and writing a powerful book about the aliens—the butterflies, the invasion, and what they all meant. Olivia, once quiet, became a poet, filling pages with the beauty of life. And though they went their separate ways, every success carried the memory of that basketball court, that promise, and the captain who taught them how to fight, survive, and dream.

After a long day at work, Lyra walked along the quiet streets, her mind still buzzing with calculations. As she rounded a corner near a park, a flash of blue caught her eye—a familiar butterfly. She froze, reaching for her phone, capturing a photo of it. Without waiting, she called the group, telling them she needed to meet them all that evening. Giselle immediately invited everyone to her home, and soon the group gathered, old friends reunited. Lyra unfolded the photo, the delicate blue wings instantly sparking memories. She asked, "Is this the one? Do you think it's the butterfly we saw before?" Without a word, she grabbed the book she'd written, filled with sketches from Tara's vision years ago and then the thought of Tara and her being marked everyone but there wasn't any familiar mark to be seen as it slightly disappeared by the time pass and thank god, she was safe FOR NOW. Turning pages, she compared the details—antennae, wings, patterns—until she opened another book from the shelf. In bold print, it read: "These alien butterflies may return periodically—every 27 years." Lyra looked up, meeting their eyes. A chill ran down her spine. This wasn't just a memory; it was a warning. There would be another arrival.

THE END?..

Afterword

With the approval of the Ministry of Education, this research-based project has empowered thousands of student authors for over ten years. Educationists recognize it as a program that significantly enhances the quality of school education.

In alignment with modern educational reforms, encouraging students to author a research work is a milestone in this journey. In this digital age of "Smart" technology, the modern school must demonstrate through research that books and technology should be used together. This is because the unique joy a child receives from a book cannot be replaced by anything else.

To prevent children from drifting away from books—which remain our primary educational tool and storehouse of human knowledge—Mahamaya Girls' College has spearheaded the "Hemamala Upahara" project for many years. Its primary objectives are to foster academic discipline, promote values, and pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who fulfilled a historic mission to empower women.

We express our gratitude to the Principal, teachers, parents, alumni of Mahamaya Girls' College, representatives of other schools, the Diyawadana Nilame, and the staff of the Sri Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic) for their support.

Seneviratne Mahalekam
(Project Creator)

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