

## **The New World**

by Mikayla Smylie

Welcome to the new world! The old world ended over ten years ago. When the old world ended, everyone who survived migrated North because it wasn't as severely impacted by natural disasters happening around the world. Soon countless people in the far North remote villages suddenly found themselves with neighbours from all over the world. At the same time, Oddities started rapidly appearing in people. An Oddity is a power that manifests when a person needs to protect themselves. They have always existed, but now that there were so many people who had been in life-or-death situations, it was no longer odd, and people started to try to figure out how to become Oddities themselves. Some Oddities refused to use their powers, some relied on them, and some used theirs to hurt others. A new hierarchy also started to appear. Other Oddities got the idea that because they were strong and they had powers, they deserved power over others.

Then came the kidnappings, the terrorism, and the brainwashing. Now those who were children when the world ended and barely remember what it was like before are forced to fight the people who bring terror to the new world.

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Lilja had been missing for days now, and her brother the invisible boy Juhani had been there for much longer than he wanted to be. He wanted nothing to do with these people and dealing with the bad Oddities at large. Even if Juhani was an Oddity himself, he didn't want to be around other Oddities. He believed that his gift only manifested because he was starving or maybe because he felt like his needs and wants were invisible. He only originally came to this bunker in the middle of the

woods near a small village for food. He was really only known there because he unsuccessfully attempted to steal food and made quite the scene in the process. Just a few days ago Juhani was just a kid who turned himself invisible to sneak into this massive bunker he stumbled upon just on the outskirts of the town he just arrived in without knowing what it was. He had no way of knowing that it was in fact the base of an organisation called the Peace corps which was originally meant to protect the surrounding area from Oddity attacks. Juhani's goal would have been met, if he didn't have a slight problem with his power. Juhani had a limited amount of time that he could turn himself invisible, and so he was caught before he could get the food he stole back to his sister. Juhani had to escape the base again before he could try to make it back to his sister empty handed, but when he got back, Lilja was gone. Juhani came back and asked for help, and upon request he was taken in for the time being.

There had already been two attempts to find Lilja. The first was sending Division 4, the search and rescue team, to the area that Lilja was last seen, but there were only hints of what happened about 150 metres away from the scene. Olive, one of the people running the whole place and an Oddity in her own right, was able to link everything back to something which confirmed the worse. Lilja had been taken by a dangerous group of Oddities known for terrorising the area and brainwashing innocent people to join their cause. They were directly responsible for driving the last leader of the Peace Corps, Heidi, into insanity which ultimately got her killed in action.

The second attempt to save Lilja was negotiation. Isamu and Olive had tried to have a discussion with the Damnation, to try to make a deal, to trade, to even pay them to give Lilja back. That went through the roof very fast, the Damnation was

known to be horrible to negotiate with, but they had denied having anything to do with it. Isamu wanted to believe that they had nothing to do with Lilja except they had too much evidence against them to ignore. The Damnation was also the only other organisation that was close enough by the area to even get to where Lilja was in the time that Juhani had left Lilja alone.

The person who was technically in charge of this whole Peace Corps, Isamu, still the guy with the eyeliner to Juhani, had been piecing together a plan to get Lilja back for hours now. Juhani had no idea what he was brewing up, but he wanted to leave as fast as possible and that was the plan. Juhani wanted his sister back and he decided that he would be taking his sister back up North even if that led them right back up to the freezing Laplands as long as it kept her safe away from anything that might try to harm her.

At this point, Isamu had made up a plan, but what he wasn't about to tell Juhani was that his little sister was taken by one of the worst groups of Oddities in the new world. The leader of the Damnation was known best for when he took out 200 soldiers from one blast from his powers, and since then he had gotten stronger. Isamu knew that the next battle would be a hard one, and he knew that he had to work very fast to have any chance of getting Lilja out alive. So, the plan was to ambush the Damnation and then make another surprise attack before they could regroup. However, all the Peace Corps' allies were refusing to step in and help, so they were on their own. They had to attack the Damnation twice in a row so that they wouldn't be prepared. The big problem with that was that the Peace Corps wouldn't be ready. So that idea was scrapped, but Isamu had no good alternative ideas. He was screwed, all he could think of was to tell the search and rescue team to hit the Damnation with as much force as they could so it could be infiltrated. Since

negotiation didn't usually work with the Damnation, this was probably his best idea that wouldn't get as many people killed.

"Isamu, I've been here for three days, that's three days too long. If you don't have a plan, I'm going in there by myself and getting Lilja back without your help." Juhani said, storming into the canteen to finally get Isamu's attention.

"Easy there tiger, I have a plan and you're not part of it." Isamu said before taking a sip of coffee. Juhani nearly lost control of himself, but he kept calm because he knew he would only be treated the child he was if he blew his top.

"Why am I benched? She's, my sister. I should be there when she's so scared." Juhani said. He had a point, even though Juhani was only 16, he was responsible for raising his sister for years now. Isamu found it a bit impressive considering everything, them being on the move for years, and somehow, they didn't starve to death or freeze.

"Because I need to make sure you're alive, Juhani. Your sister is 11 and you shouldn't make her lose the only family she has left. She's better off scared than alone. You get to stay here." Isamu says not even looking up from his plate of food. He had worked with so many broken people in the past that people talking to him like this didn't even phase him. Isamu took another sip from his coffee while he watched the truth sink into Juhani. The kid was too young to be alone, but he was, and he surely felt awful for losing his sister while trying to get them a meal.

"Fine, I won't go. You better send her to me as soon as you get her though." Juhani muttered, Isamu nodded. He knew how it felt to look away for a second and realise you lost someone.

Isamu drifted into his thoughts. He still wore his boyfriend Kasht's kohl every day just because he knew that Kasht would find it amusing. Kasht had been severely

wounded last month in a particularly destructive battle, shot with an arrow from an Oddity archer. During the battle, Isamu's own Oddity had been unlocked. Isamu had the ability to manipulate water and he was able to use it to give the Peace Corps the upper hand in the battle. However he still thought about what it cost, what it meant for him. He would never not be an Oddity now and he would have to live knowing he killed multiple people in that battle. It had been only a month and a half, but it felt like so much longer without Kasht by his side. Isamu decided that if or when Kasht woke up, Isamu would never tell him that he killed for him. He didn't think Kasht would ever approve even if it probably saved his life. Kasht should have been the person running the Peace Corps, not Isamu, at least he would have kept the meaning of the name.

Isamu didn't even notice that Juhani had left, he was so lost in thought. Isamu sighed and sent out an alert to Division 4, the search and rescue team, and Division 1, combat and damage control, that they would be sending an attack on the Damnation. Weapons had to be sharpened, armour needed to be put on, and they needed time to prepare, he put the rendezvous for in an hour. By then they should be ready. Isamu picked himself up from the table, bid his coffee farewell, and started walking down to the weapons room. The use of guns in the new world was non-existent, it became difficult to source the needed materials to make guns work, so after just a few years they faded into obscurity and instead it was weapons like swords and arrows and axes that were preferred.

Isamu went down to the weapons room. Although he was an Oddity, he still used weapons. He never wanted to rely only on his powers, for him it was a last resort. Isamu had the ability to control water. The first time he used his power he used it like a whip, that had since been his go to. Isamu joined the others in the room

and grabbed his arrows to sharpen the tips. He didn't like to replaced arrows completely, it was wasteful, so preferred to just keep sharpening them until they could pierce leather effortlessly. Then he made sure his bowstring was well conditioned, he didn't need it snapping or fraying on him. He wound the string back up before putting his arrows in his quiver that was laced to his thigh and strung his bow again. Then he went across the hall to the armoury, his arm brace needed replacing and he needed to put on his shoulder pauldrons and put on a proper breastplate. When he finally took off his arm guard, it started to fall apart in his hands. That wouldn't have been good for him. He placed a metal plate under the new guard and put a chainmail shirt under his breastplate. There was no way he would be getting more stitches today. He buckled his armour tight so it wouldn't move around. This would be the ambush of his life, and he wasn't at all excited. He avoided killing people unless they were a threat, and he avoided starting a battle, but he realised that his hands were tied, and he couldn't do better than what he was doing.

Isamu finished with his armour and joined all the others who were done and waited for the rest to finish. They all flowed in with different looks on their faces. He could tell many of them were scared, others looked numb. Some just looked tired. Isamu felt a mix of emotions, he was always scared that if he went into battle he would never come out. That was still the fear, but he had to do this.

"You all know the drill, the Damnation has kidnapped a child. We are going to get that child back! Division 1 will lead the attack from the south side. Once their defences are weakened Division 4 will be signalled to infiltrate and search the building for the child. She's an 11-year-old girl, with blonde hair, and blue eyes, who responds to the name Lilja. If anything goes wrong, retreat, I will not be responsible

for all of you getting your asses killed. Am I understood?" Isamu made sure his words were enunciated and he projected his voice, so everyone undoubtedly heard him. An echo of "Yes sir" could be heard. Isamu led everyone out. He had to be a leader, he couldn't show he was actually terrified. He wasn't sure if he would make it back this time since he would be leading, he was the front line. He knew Olive would be capable if she needed to take over, her Oddity made her a great asset anyways. Olive had the ability to absorb energy blasts either from explosions or from Oddity attacks. But Isamu didn't want to join the last leader Heidi. This was exactly the type of battle that would be capable of killing a leader. It was in the last major battle that the Peace Corps had had that Heidi was killed. She was brainwashed by the Damnation and with her Oddity went on a rampage. She killed a handful of people before she was stopped. Isamu told himself that it wasn't his fault that she had to be killed and that there was no hope left for her, but it still ate him up inside. Some say that Heidi was already long gone before Isamu killed her, but they never saw how her humanity returned as she faded away. Whatever happened, Isamu knew that he didn't want to leave the Peace Corps alone, they were his family.

Isamu led Division 1 out into the woods. Division 1 had just over 100 soldiers, there was no specific uniform for them, the only thing that distinguished them from any other division was a red band that was worn around the wrist. They all were required to wear leather armour and chainmail, but it all looked different, different shades of leather which were all customised to fit the wearer perfectly. The chainmail wasn't usually visible but it was there to protect them from slicing damage. Division 4 looked similar to Division 1 with the leather armour and chainmail and a similar amount of soldiers, about 100. The bands around their wrists were blue and they carried smaller tools, things like ropes, knives, and smoke bombs. Both would follow

Isamu's lead, when they started to get close, Isamu knocked his bow ready to take out the camera system in one shot. When that shot happened though it wouldn't be long until a full attack started. Isamu paused just outside the view of the cameras and signalled for all the people behind him to stop. Isamu knew that he only had a minute at most to take the first camera out. Then just in the interest of saving energy and effort, they would have to wait until guards came out to see what was going on. Isamu decided that everyone else should stay hidden until something happened. There was no way that he would make their numbers known. He wasn't about to give them more of a disadvantage than they already had.

It was time, no more stalling. Isamu stepped out from the foliage that was keeping him concealed, he spotted the camera and aimed for it. When he heard the shattering of the glass, he knew that he got a perfect shot and it was no longer functional, and now he waited. Isamu grabbed an arrow from his quiver and knocked his bow again in anticipation. It didn't take long for the guards to rush out; there were only two guards who came out at first. He was in plain sight, so there was no going back now. Isamu took a deep breath before aiming his bow at one of their arms and released. It was straight though. The guard wouldn't be able to use their arm, but they would be able to retreat to send back up. Isamu knocked his bow again and aimed for the other guard's leg. It wasn't as devastating, but it was effective. Isamu waved his hand behind him for the first wave of Division 1 to follow him up. They would be able to hold off the next wave. Isamu watched as the guard with an arrow through his arm ran back for cover. They were about to find out if the plan would go well, or if the plan would go up in flames.

Isamu watched and waited as the next wave came out. He kept in mind how many arrows he had left in his quiver 27, after he ran out, he would have to switch to



using the water in his water skin because he didn't see any water anywhere else that he could use. When the wave came out, Isamu's blood ran cold, they had the numbers for sure, maybe 150 soldiers. He didn't know how they had so many followers, so many people who'd been brainwashed into thinking or agreed that kidnapping was okay. There was no time to take a deep breath, he started going for lethal shots with the arrows. Isamu tried to find cover so that he didn't need to keep watching his back while he was shooting arrows. He looked around and there was nothing, 7 arrows he was still searching for cover, he had no time to pick up arrows either. He set his sights on the roof, it was low enough he could get on top of it, how how. Three more arrows later, Isamu found a way that he could get on the roof of the building, so he climbed up. He had the high ground now and he was always much more deadly when he wasn't in direct line of view. However, from on top of the building he could see the battle much clearer. More people from the Damnation came out, they just kept coming, although Division 1 was holding their own, they were very much outnumbered now, almost by triple and it seemed like it would become more soon. Even if Division 1 was about to take out three people each, how long could they keep going like this? Isamu didn't have enough arrows to keep going like this, he knew if he got in the middle of the action he would be able to knock at least a few of the enemy soldiers out. He jumped down from the roof and landed right in the middle of the wave.

"Shit." Isamu exhaled, he was surrounded, and he knew that this would not end well for him. It was a bad idea to jump. He decided to ditch his bow as it wouldn't help him at close range, and he opened his water skin and drew an arrow. As much as he didn't want to rely on it, he had to. He had to use his power; it was the only way he would be able to survive this. He used the arrow as a grip and used the

water from his waterskin to make a blade. It was thin and long and sharp. Isamu made eye contact with the person directly in front of him before he sliced his way through the crowd of people. Isamu kept on the balls of his feet and moved swiftly. He was an excellent archer and an Oddity, but his greatest strength was his agility. There was no one to watch his back so he had to do it himself. Division 1 was starting to be overwhelmed by the numbers, there was no one to watch his back there, and he wasn't able to call upon one person in particular in Division 4, so calling them up would be risking their lives too. It was one person after another that he sliced through, the water blade he made was no longer clear but was instead streaked with blood.

Isamu eventually made it out of the crowd of Damnation guards but not without being followed, he had put a huge target on his back and for what? They weren't even close to being able to call in the search and rescue team. The mission was failing, and he could only do so much to make the odds better for them. It seemed dire, but there was no room for Isamu to keep thinking after he found himself face to face with a very large-looking man with an axe. Isamu gulped, he was at least 6 inches taller than Isamu and he was twice as wide & all muscle. Isamu would not be surprised if this guy was an Oddity that made him so beefy, it seemed like a superhuman amount of muscle. Isamu knew using his water-blade would mean he would need to get too close, but also the water that would be the only thing he could use that would have any meaningful damage.

Isamu cursed at himself and put his arrow back in his quiver, but he used his Oddity to keep the blob of water in the air. With his Oddity he turned the water into a long water whip for more range. Isamu lashed out with the water whip but the big Damnation guard ducked it and rushed in. Isamu raised himself up on his toes so

that if he had to jump out of the way it would be faster, he also kept his fists up in front of his face to try to block any headshots. The big guy took the first swing, Isamu ducked, he tried to use his water as a whip but he realised it was nearly ineffective so close in. He changed his approach and use the water as a rope to choke out the Damnation guard, but it was also useless because he couldn't get a hold of him. The guard kept swinging. Isamu kept jumping out of the way and avoiding taking hits, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. Isamu grabbed one of his arrows again. Isamu decided to do what he was doing before and turn an arrow into a sword with his water. He realised after using the sword what the issue was. He watched as the water from his blade bounced off the big guy but just a few inches away. This guy was an Oddity, and he had a shield. He had heard about his guy before, he wasn't just any random soldier, it was one of the generals of the Damnation. All of Isamu's attacks seemed worthless, maybe if there was a way to get behind the general he could get the upper hand. His last choice was to try to outrun the general and put enough distance in between them to be able to use his bow and try to get behind the general. That's what he did, all he could hear was his feet hitting the dirt as he ran back into the woods.

It was working, but the general was following. Isamu realised he would have to keep running. Every few seconds Isamu would stop and fire an arrow, and they would either stick into spots where there was no shield, or would deflect off. Most of the open areas were on his back. That was the pattern until the guy broke out into a sprint. Isamu knew he was going to be trapped, he tried to start climbing up a tree, but his blood ran cold when he felt a tug at his leather pauldron. He was caught and his only choice was to quickly use an arrowhead to cut the straps that were keeping the pauldron attached to him. Him cutting the armour meant that the big guy flew

backwards and landed on the ground, Isamu used it as a chance to climb all the way up the tree and count his arrows. Only five left, and he at once used one to shoot at the general before he could try to shake Isamu out of the tree. From being on higher ground he was able to see the battle, they were losing badly.

In the split second between when he realised the trouble he was in and when the general actually started shaking the tree again, he sent out an order to retreat on his wristband. The battle was too far gone, and he wouldn't let his stubbornness hurt more people. When the tree he was in started shaking Isamu knew he had to go for only kill shots now otherwise this was about to become lethal for him. His armour was damaged, and he was just down to 4 arrows. He made sure he saw his side retreating before he took a risky move. Three people were trailing behind his retreating Peace Corps troops who were Damnation guards. He jumped over to the nearby tree to get a better aim, and one after another took them down, each time the arrows whistled in the air before finding their target. Then it was down to the one big guy who was still trying to murder him. He wasn't too concerned about getting himself killed anymore, everyone else would be safe, and if he took out this guy it would be better for everyone. He had to think fast before he fell out of this tree. Or maybe that was a better idea, get out of the tree. He had one chance to nail this otherwise he was dead, he might die no matter what, but it was a risk he was willing to take. Before he did anything he sent an alert for a medic to come to his location, if he was still alive, he wouldn't be for long after. Then he knocked his bow with his last arrow. Isamu jumped out of the tree and twisted himself so that he would be upside down and be able to shoot the big guy in the back of the head. The two hit the ground at the same time. Isamu had a few seconds of conscious thought to realise

he had at least temporarily survived the fall and the general didn't. Isamu then became too confused to make out what was happening around him.

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Isamu woke up to a bright light surrounding him, the light was so bright that he wasn't sure if he was dead or not. When his head started to ache, he realised he was probably still alive. When he looked around everything seemed familiar, he was in the hospital wing, which meant that the medics were actually able to get to him without much threat. The more he looked the more his eyes stung from the light. Then Isamu sighed when he recounted in his head the number of people who were dead because of him in this battle. There would be at least a handful even though for a while he tried to go for non-lethal blows. He felt horrible that the mission was a failure, and he wasn't able to get Lilja back for Juhani. It was a complete failure. He assumed Juhani already knew, and he wasn't sure if that meant he'd get yelled at later or if Juhani was at this moment very much not okay. The latter was definitely true, it was no use trying to fool himself into thinking that maybe Juhani would be okay at this moment. Isamu tried to get up from bed and noticed how many machines he was hooked up to. He was definitely out for some significant amount of time to justify the number of tubes going into him. His left shoulder also had a large number of bandages around it and when he tried to move it, it was stiff and sore like one hell of a bruise. He started to carefully take out the tubes one by one, he got three out before he started to bleed and four out before someone noticed and tried to stop him.

"As much as it's good you're aware enough to do something, I would advise you to stop being an idiot." Olive, the girl who was second in command and would

have been running the place while he was out, said. She had just entered the room and noticed Isamu who was abiding by his own rules. Olive turned the lights directly above him off when she passed by the light switch. Juhani trailed in behind her, his face was red, and his hair was a mess. Isamu tried to hide his shame for failing the rescue mission. He looked to the ground to avoid eye contact. Olive grabbed a medic for Isamu's bloody arms, while Juhani came face to face with Isamu. Juhani had his arms crossed in a protective manner, and Isamu finally looked up. Neither spoke for a while until Isamu broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, I failed. I thought I had it covered but it got out of hand." Isamu tried to make eye contact but after a moment he couldn't bear to. He was ashamed of his failure, and he was in no condition to try another ambush, it was a stupid plan, and it had an expectable outcome. Juhani took a deep breath and closed his eyes pondering what he wanted to say.

"You tried, and you failed. I don't think things would have been much different had I been there to help. I would be madder, but it looks like you already got what you deserve for failing, I don't need to chew you out." Juhani said with a very even tone. It was insane to think that the same kid that broke into the base because he was hungry, broke out and demanded to be let back in again was being so level-headed when his sister had been missing for days now. Isamu was shocked by the reaction he got from Juhani.

"You're being very mature, I would not have acted the same way, especially when I was your age." Isamu mumbled. A shocked look crossed over Juhani's face as the usually very calm and unbothered Isamu admitted he would not have been so kind. Juhani lowered himself so that Isamu would have a harder time avoiding eye contact.

“I’m only acting this way because I know you could have died in that battle.”

Juhani said coldly. He was back to his usual demeanour, the one that made everyone feel smaller than him. Isamu wasn’t as shocked by the shift as he was with how mature and calm Juhani was being. Juhani took a step back when Olive returned with a medic to fix Isamu’s bleeding arms and stalked out of the room. The tubes didn’t go back in, instead, his arms were cleaned and taped up with some cotton to stop any more bleeding. Olive sat in the chair next to Isamu once the medic was done.

“What did you do to bonk your head so good? You were down and out for almost a whole week. That’s one hell of a concussion.” Olive asked making sure to keep her voice lower so that she didn’t give Isamu a headache. Isamu chuckled a little before he started to explain.

“I was in a tree cause a knucklehead was trying to kill me, jumped down and shot him with my last arrow. You should have been there, it was pretty impressive.” Isamu described the moment vaguely. Olive shook her head at Isamu.

“Who are you and what did you do with Isamu? Since when do you pull a risky stunt like that?” Olive was amused at the description, and Isamu grinned.

“Since I decided I want to live life like I’m a comic book character.” Isamu said, it wasn’t the real answer, but he didn’t want to bring the mood down. He was trying to keep it light-hearted since he was out of commission for a week. Damn, a week. That meant that Lilja was missing for more than nine days now, and since Juhani was still there he could assume that she was still missing.

“You’re full of surprises now that you’re running this place.” Olive said, referring to the few other stunts he pulled. Isamu sighed, it was true he had become less cautious, and more destructive, he always chalked it up to him being put in a

leadership position so quickly when he wasn't ready. However, Olive thought it was that in tandem with no longer having his two biggest supports, Heidi and Kasht, there for him with one being dead and the other being unable to be there. Either of them could have been right, either way, Isamu was still young, and his predecessor was far from ready when she became a leader which may have made it easier for her to go mad. They would never know the full extent of what happened to Heidi, even before she died it seemed like she was too far gone to save. Isamu after a while started to wonder what happened while he was out.

"What happened, I thought I was passed out for days, but you said I was just confused. I don't remember anything though. What's with my shoulder too?" Isamu said, suddenly being unable to get a complete thought out without difficulty. Olive waited until Isamu was completely finished talking before she attempted to answer.

"I'm no medic, but they said you probably landed hard on your shoulder and hit your head. You were confused for multiple days, out of commission basically, it doesn't surprise me that you can't remember much from last week, this is actually my fourth time explaining everything to you. Your shoulder dislocated and it was nasty to look at. You won't be able to use your bow for a while and you better not move it around too much either. Any questions?" Olive explained for apparently the fourth time. Isamu wasn't surprised by much, it would explain why his shoulder hurt and he expected at least a concussion from the fall.

"No questions concerning my current state. I know the drill for dislocations. What did I miss while I was 'out of commission' as you put it?" Isamu asked, he was mildly amused by the wording Olive decided on. It was nice that there was some light being made of his current state. Olive however sighed at the question and Isamu could at once tell she didn't truly want to answer it.



“Right so,” Olive started with a slight huff. “A couple things happened. Obviously, Lilja wasn’t found, most of Division 1 was injured but relatively minor injuries, mostly just stitches, and two broken bones. There were no deaths, likely thanks to you calling a retreat.”

“We were outnumbered.” Isamu cut in. Olive nodded.

“I know, and it’s not a bad thing you retreated. I think a war has started though, so I made an order for Division 2 to evacuate to the village for the time being in preparation.” Olive said. She had been thrust into the leadership position, and she had made completely reasonable decisions. Isamu realised she was a much better fit for being the leader than him, she was able to step up to the task much better than he ever had. She had even used the damage control team to prevent damage rather than to just fix it, it was brilliant. Isamu still had a problem though, he wouldn’t be able to fight in the war he started.

“Great so I started a war, and I can’t fight in it.” Isamu said while rolling his eyes which he had to admit made him dizzy.

“I would have done the same.” Olive tried to reason but Isamu shook his head.

“No, you wouldn’t have, you would have found a better way. I started a war, I’ll have to start sending messages off to our allies for backup when the next attack comes. I’ll do that today. As soon as I’m let out of this hospital.” Isamu said he wanted to get up and start at that moment, but he knew he would be stopped.

“No need, I already did. No response from our northern and eastern allies yet but the western allies have said they will supply homes for refugees and will send supplies, the southern allies said once an actual war begins, they will send back up if asked.” Olive explained, Isamu was shocked.

“They didn’t offer anything like that when I was asking for help.” Isamu said. He wasn’t sure if that meant he was just that bad of a leader or if Olive had a way with words or how that even happened.

“I didn’t send letters, I sent parties out to contact them directly to explain. The North and East said they would send letters once decisions were made. I don’t have high hopes for them but it’s at least good that the other allies listened this time.”

Olive explained Isamu realised that she was a far better leader than he would ever be. In the days that Isamu was unable to be a leader, Olive stepped up to task and did an amazing job at it. When Isamu had to step up to the task unexpectedly, he didn’t think about anything, he had no strategy. It was chaotic, and the Peace Corps had lost the values that its name suggested. Perhaps it would be in the best interest of the Peace Corps to have Olive be appointed as the boss.

“Okay so war is on the brink of starting but we have allies, any more good news then?” Isamu asked with a hint of sarcasm. Olive looked as if she was conflicted with the question. Isamu was mildly concerned that something else happened and he feared for the worse. Olive looked as if she was preparing herself for something. Isamu was getting impatient by the time Olive said anything.

“There’s one more thing but you have to promise to not jump out of bed and hurt yourself when I say it.” She said matter flatly. Isamu’s face contorted into a look of confusion, he wasn’t sure what kind of news would warrant that type of reaction from him. Olive was waiting for Isamu to agree to whatever it was.

“Yeah, okay fine, just spit it out already you’re killing me here.” Isamu said. Olive looked like she was bracing herself for whatever Isamu did next.

“He’s awake.” Olive said with a voice as calm and clear as she could muster. Isamu’s eyes widened, it couldn’t be true.

“He’ as in Kasht. Kasht is awake? Like my Kasht?” Isamu said in utter disbelief. He nearly didn’t believe it at all. It was insane to think of.

“Yes, your Kasht. He woke up while you were out of it.” Olive confirmed, Isamu felt like he was about to explode from all the things he was feeling at the moment. He was shaking a little bit and trying to hold back from letting himself just fall apart.

“Are you kidding me? You better not be kidding me here Olive, that’s a really cruel joke to play on someone.” Isamu said being unable to believe it at all to the point he imagined maybe it was a joke, or that maybe he just imagined it. He might have been even dreaming. Olive shook her head.

“I’m serious, he woke up a couple days ago, and he doesn’t seem to have permanent damage, he’s been doing physical therapy to strengthen his muscles again, but he can talk, and he can walk with support by some miracle. He visited you a couple times too.” Olive explained again. Isamu couldn’t believe it, he thought he was dreaming. Isamu pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t just dreaming it.

“Where is he? I want to see him. Right now.” Isamu said as he started to get out of bed before a wave of dizziness hit him. He grabbed onto the bed to steady himself before he grabbed a robe to put on to keep warm in the cold hallways. Olive didn’t try to stop him, instead, she walked by his side to make sure he wouldn’t fall. Isamu was slow, his legs were stiff, and he had to be careful not to move around his shoulder. But he made it work, and soon got the hang of it, he decided he would need to do some serious stretching as soon as he was able to. But what mattered at the moment wasn’t his stiff joints, it was Kasht. Eventually, Isamu got the hang out waking again and didn’t need as much help from Olive. The walk down the hallway felt like it was in slow motion, maybe because it was cold and his muscles were stiff

and walking was slow and difficult, but it was agonising. The past month and a half had been horrible for him, he felt like his main support system was knocked down the day he became a leader. He was determined to see Kasht, he didn't know what he would do when he actually got there, but he just needed to see him up and breathing and living.

Eventually, Isamu got to Kasht's room, he hesitated at the door and Olive took a step back, she knew it wasn't her place to intrude, it was their moment and Isamu was capable of walking in the room himself. Eventually Isamu finally found the courage to knock on the door and open it. He had done that so many times in the last month and a half just for the rude realisation to hit him once again, but this time when he opened the door, this time he saw a surprised Kasht with a dust rag in hand cleaning the shelves in his room. He was frozen in his place and was using a chair to rest one of his legs. Isamu smiled and closed the door behind him when he went running to hug Kasht. They fell backwards onto Kasht's big fluffy rug that Isamu always loved rolling around in. For a long time, they didn't say anything, they were plenty happy just being able to hold each other again. Kasht didn't feel like he missed much time because to him time just skipped, but to Isamu, it felt like the first time in forever he wasn't alone. It took everything in him to not start crying happy tears, but Isamu's eyes eventually started to water when reality finally hit him, and he knew it wasn't a dream. Kasht had a giant smile on his face.

"I missed you so much." Isamu said, his words were muffled but Kasht could understand everything, he rubbed Isamu's back and tried his best to avoid his one shoulder, but he knew he got too close when Isamu jumped a little bit.

"I'm here now. I won't leave you." Kasht whispered, his voice was a little rough, it sounded as if he had a sore throat. Kasht was aware of everything that

happened, he had been brought up to speed on everything that happened while he was gone, he knew Isamu's shoulder was injured, and he knew that Isamu was the one running the Peace Corps. He knew about the failed battle, and he knew that their friend Heidi was dead. No one told him but he knew while he was in a coma, Isamu would have been struggling. For him, it was just weird that he lost a bunch of time, but for everyone else he just wasn't there, teetering between life and death. Perhaps now he had an Oddity, but it was likely he wouldn't know for a long time.

"I started a war," Isamu said, Kasht kissed the side of Isamu's head before he answered.

"I know." Kasht asked. Isamu tightened his hold on Kasht as if he would disappear if he let go.

"I don't know what to do, I have to sit on the side-lines and watch as the war goes on." Isamu said he wanted to cry, he felt so powerless.

"We'll get through it, you don't have to worry." Kasht said, he was trying to be reassuring but he truly didn't know what would be next for them, what a war would mean in the new world. Isamu still wasn't sure about anything. However, his job in the moment wasn't to give anything definitive, it was to provide comfort.

"Will we though? Will we get through it?" Isamu asked worriedly. Kasht replied,

"I'm sure. We'll get through it."

—

It had been a week and a half since the last battle, it had been a hell of a few days, lots of planning for their next steps, the Northern and Eastern allies sent troops

to help the upcoming war. Another plan was made, one that mirrored the last. An attack by Division 1 would be made before the Damnation could attack them. Then they would no matter what, send a second wave. The last battle was a loss for the Peace Corps, but they learned some valuable information. Despite the Damnation having the numbers, they did not have the same skill, which meant that a second ambush right after the first might just be crazy enough to work. It was decided that Olive would be leading Division 1 and after much debate and protest from Isamu, it was also decided that Juhani would lead Division 4. Isamu was still not in favour of Juhani being involved in the battle, but given his ability to turn himself invisible, and how he had snuck into the Peace Corps' base undetected nearly 2 weeks ago. Olive trusted Juhani's ability to sneak into the Damnation base and find his sister.

"Olive I know you're leading right now but I'm still not sure about Juhani getting involved. He's really young and I don't know if he's trained enough." Isamu said to Olive, they were walking down to the armoury. Isamu's arm was in a sling against his body so that he wouldn't be moving it around. Olive had to replace a few pieces of her armour and Isamu was still trying to plead his case on why Juhani shouldn't go.

"You were younger when you joined the Peace Corps, and he's a lot stronger than you think. While you were confused, Juhani was training. He can turn weapons invisible, and he's started to get good at using a short sword. I'm fully confident that he'll make it out of there safely with his sister." Olive says Isamu was blown away, just two weeks ago Ilmari could only turn his cotton shirt and pants invisible, now he could turn metal invisible too? That was insane progress, in such a short amount of time. They entered the armoury and Olive started removing the pieces of armour that she needed to replace, just her shoulder guards and one of her upper arm braces.

“I’m shocked, that’s leaps and bounds of progress. Wait what about his time limit, is it still the same or what? That was his problem when he tried to sneak in here, and he couldn’t turn the food invisible.” Isamu asked, he grabbed a pre-made shoulder guard to hand to Olive so that she could work on customising it for her smaller frame. Olive started measuring the leather and making marks for what she needed to cut off and shape.

“He has a longer time limit now, he’s just all around better. He has up to another minute and a half of time now. Every day that his sister wasn’t back he took his anger out in the training room. I think he’ll actually be able to get Lilja out.” Olive said she started to cut pieces of leather off her new shoulder guards and measured as she went. Isamu was shocked, he had been beating himself up about the mission not going as planned, and he thought it might have sent Juhani into some sort of rage, but he had channelled that into something that would help. Juhani wasn’t kidding when he said that he would get his sister back himself if Isamu didn’t get her back.

“He’s a lot more than what I thought. I didn’t think he was much more than what meets the eye.” Isamu said trailing off while Olive was starting to clean up the cuts she made on her new shoulder guards. She worked fast with leather, it was always a talent of hers.

“You assumed without knowing what he was capable of. I mean you forget that Juhani’s been raising that 11-year-old for years now and they made it down from the Laplands. No one makes it down from the Laplands these days unless they mean business.” Olive said. She was right, Isamu assumed without truly knowing, he just completely disregarded that he had travelled down from the Laplands to get

there, it would have taken a long time in the freezing elements to get to the south by foot. Isamu realised that Juhani was so much tougher than he was given credit for.

“Holy crap, he’s got guts. Like serious guts. I can’t believe I was overlooking that. I think you’re right, I think he might be the missing piece. If he had been there last time maybe it wouldn’t have been a failed mission.” Isamu rubbed his face with his good hand, he was back to blaming himself for what happened. Olive was finished with her shoulder guards and got a new piece of leather to make the upper arm brace that was missing in her set now.

“Don’t sweat the stuff that’s already happened, you can’t change that. Though right now what you can do is sit aside, rest, and let everyone else fight this one. We’re gonna win this one and end this once and for all.” Olive said. She was making quick work with her arm guard, she had the measurements down and was able to cut down the leather to make it fit her arm, now she was just punching holes in it so that it could be laced to her arm.

“You’re right, we’ll win this one. I shouldn’t worry.” Isamu tried to convince himself, he wasn’t sure, but he was hoping he could be optimistic. Olive finally started lacing the arm guard to herself and she continued.

“We **are** going to win this, right? Now go rest, you’re still concussed. I can handle this.” Olive said, her arm guard was fastened to her arm, Isamu hoped that she was right and that she did have this. He definitely didn’t.

“Good luck Olive, be careful,” Isamu said before he left, he knew he needed to rest but he knew he wouldn’t be able to until the mission went well. Olive sent out an alert for all able-bodied soldiers in Division 1 to prepare for battle. They had about 150 people in Division 1 now thanks to the backup from their allies. They were all prepared for war, all the weapons had been sharpened beforehand, so Olive set the



rendezvous for 30 minutes out. Then it was to Division 4, they were set to be ready at the same time, they would be just behind Division 1 and just lay back until they were signalled to start infiltrating the Damnation. Juhani would be leading that team, not because he knew how, but because he would be the crucial part of the plan. If anyone could get in, it was Juhani there was no question about it.

Olive grabbed her weapon of choice, a short sword, and left to get to the rendezvous point to wait. Soldiers started flooding in, and they separated themselves between Divisions 1 and 4, Juhani's light blond hair was visible in the crowd, and Olive pulled him to the front.

"If anyone is going to get in there, it's you. You're leading this one." Olive told Juhani, he was shocked and didn't say much about it. Olive took the moment to announce it to Division 4.

"Alright, Juhani is going to lead the second part of the mission, he has the best chance of finding his sister. For everyone else, the goal is to give cover so that Lilja can be found. Am I understood?" Olive yelled everyone knew the plan, but how it would be carried out would be completely made up as they went along. But no matter what, they would not retreat this time. Olive's question was answered with an echo of 'yes ma'am's including from Juhani. He looked scared but ready. They moved out after that, Division 1 leading and Division 4 following behind them. It was time.

The camera is on the South side of the Damnation base. Olive could see that the camera hadn't been replaced since Isamu shot it. Instead, two guards were standing in front of the doors. This might be a lot easier than Olive thought. The guards had swords on them, so using hers would be pointless, it would mean she would have to fight them both at the same time which would not be a smart move.

Instead, she called up two other members of Division 1 who used bows, to take the two out at the same time. It was fast and accurate, one minute the guards were fine, and the next they were falling to the ground lifeless. Olive revealed herself from the surrounding forest to check the bodies, and if there were any keys or cards on them to get into the building. Olive checked their pockets and pouches and eventually found a card, looking at the door she was able to swipe it. Olive waved behind her for the rest of Division 1 to follow her, as soon as she opened this door it was battle mode and she needed to be prepared. Once she had backed up behind her she was ready to swipe the card. Once she did, the door opened and Division 1 started to storm inside. Olive very quickly had to use her sword, and by her standards, there was no such thing as a non-kill shot. Every swing she took at someone thinned out the crowd, her boots would be stained with blood after. She was being brutal, but she was clearing the way for Division 4 and specifically Juhani. She saw arrows being shot in both directions and men on both sides going down, she did her best to clear the crowd but it just so happened that people kept going. She was sure the Oddities would be coming for her, but her plan was to try and take as many blasts as possible and save her team.

Olive was right when thought Oddities would be coming, they were, she could see balls of energy flying overhead, and she couldn't yell for everyone to take cover before she heard bodies hitting the ground. Division 1 was not aware of what to expect, so Olive ran forward and closed the distance between her and the enemies in front of her. Olive was mad, she had no time to warn her team and they were now gravely injured if not worse. Olive kept slicing her way through people until she got close to the Oddity responsible, her sword was dripping red and the Oddity in front of her looked like he would kill her in a second if he could. He shot first, and Olive

ducked to make him think that he could hurt her, just until she was close enough to use her sword. She had to keep him guessing, so for the next few shots he took as Olive inches closer, she dodged. Once Olive was close enough to him, she took a direct hit like it was nothing. He was shocked, he pulled out his sword and a duel began.

Olive was surprised when he took the first swing, Olive was forced to block. This would be no problem for her, she thought as she kept blocking his sloppy swings. Olive could tell that this was a person who relied on their powers and was rarely trained without them. Olive on the other hand couldn't control her powers, there was nothing for her to control, so she was forced to become an amazing swordsman. It was maybe a minute of blocking attacks before Olive found a place where she could switch to offence. This guy's offensive technique was sloppy, what about his defence. Olive took an aggressive swing with her sword at the guy. His blocks were better, but weak. His arms were shaking and Olive could just tell that the sword wasn't weighed enough for him. It was with their next collision that the other guy tried something new. He had channelled his powers into the sword blade. Olive smiled, this was going to be fun. Olive was pushed back by the force a few times but ultimately she was able to come back from it. Olive wondered why *this* guy was acting like he was the next big boss, then she realised how young he looked, no older than 12. A child, a literal child, Olive was shocked, she couldn't believe she was fighting a child and they were considered an enemy. Olive mentally decided that the fight with this child was over. She kept her sword in hand while she backed the child against the wall before she took the sword out of his hand.

"Why are you doing this?" Olive's voice boomed when she asked, she couldn't let it go that a child was fighting for the Damnation.

“Let me go!” the child said while struggling to find a way out. Olive was not backing down.

“Who is making you do this!” Olive yelled the kid looked like he would cry, but Olive didn’t want to fall for any trap he may have been setting up.

“I don’t know!” the kid yelled. Olive was scaring him, she could tell but she needed to know which cruel person she needed to stop from making kids fight their battles. Olive looked around her, this was the time to give the signal to Division 4. She let the kid go, but he didn’t move at all, Olive then tapped her communication device three times to signal all of Division 4 to advance. The kid stood awkwardly not knowing what to do, Olive didn’t really know what to do either, she was good at making herself look scary, but this was new territory. She looked at the kid again.

“Do you want to be fighting this battle?” She asked. The kid didn’t say anything, instead opting to shake his head profusely. Olive made a split-second decision just then.

“Get out of the bunker, find a tree in the forest and climb up, we will finish this conversation later. Got it?” Olive said. The kid nodded before turning and running out of the bunker. She didn’t know if she had just helped someone or if she screwed over a future version of herself. However there was no time to keep thinking about it, the kid was gone and she would deal with him later. She watched behind her as Division 4 started to move in. The second stage of the plan was a go. Juhani was waiting to turn invisible until he met with Olive again.

“What do I do now?” Juhani asked, Olive had her sword raised and was stalking down the hallway to try to protect Juhani from any approaching danger.

“Do your usual Juhani thing. Turn invisible and steal stuff. It's not rocket science.” Olive said. She understood that this was Juhani’s first mission but it should

have been easy for him, he had been the central element of the plan after all. They had to keep going. There was no room for cold feet or turning back. It was Juhani's time to shine.

"Right okay, see you on the other side then," Juhani said as he turned himself invisible. He cringed at what he said, see you on the other side, how lame to say. As soon as Juhani was invisible again he started running down the halls. He had to find his sister and fast. Even if he had more time to work with this time, it was still a limited amount of time and no one would be there to save him if things went sideways. He heard all the other people he was leading behind him, but they all were dispersing trying to find where Lilja was. Juhani kept wandering along and just imagined that it was just like the last time he snuck in somewhere and no one was trying to get him killed. He went much faster thinking like that.

He made it to nearly the end of the line before he decided that he had to start calling out for his sister, he wasn't getting anywhere and he was running out of time.

"LILJA! It's Juhani! I'm here to get you!" Juhani started to yell. He knew it blew away his cover, but he wasn't getting anywhere just from wandering. He kept calling out for Lilja, and before long he heard someone calling back his name. He took a chance and turned in the direction of the voice. There was a corridor, and Juhani followed it. He kept a hand on the hilt of his sword, just in case he needed to use it. He kept walking until he found a locked door. Without thinking, Juhani kicked the door down, inside he saw a small figure curled up by the wall. He looked closer and realised it was his sister. But something was off about her, she looked terrified. Juhani was still invisible when he realised that locked doors don't just magically fly open. Juhani kept silent but let himself become visible again. When Lilja saw her

brother her eyes lit up. She jumped to life and ran to her brother. Juhani wanted to savour this reunion, but he knew they weren't out of danger yet.

"Keep quiet, I'm gonna get us out of here," Juhani said, Lilja nodded and made a motion to zip her mouth shut. Juhani held her hand and led her out of the corridor, and back into the hallway where they started to move quickly back outside. Juhani wasn't completely sure how to signal that he found Lilja, but he had to keep going while the coast was clear, and for all, he knew he might need backup. Juhani could see the light from the outside door when he stopped dead in his tracks. A middle-aged man with a cane and scars all over his hands was standing in the middle of the hallway. Juhani knew that this wasn't someone from the Peace Corps. This must have been someone else, someone he did not want to mess with. Juhani tried to shield Lilja behind him but he had a feeling it wouldn't be much use.

"Impressive that you managed to go so deep into the base without getting yourself killed. I'll be needing her back though child, you should know that taking what's not yours is wrong." The man said, Juhani got chills, this couldn't be happening. No one owned his sister, and his sister was kidnapped, to begin with. Juhani couldn't believe it.

"She's my sister, you kidnapped her!" Juhani spat, and the man in front of him started to laugh. It first came out small but grew until it was a cackle. Juhani didn't get what was so funny, he just wanted to get out, he didn't have time to keep chit-chatting with some maniac. Juhani took a step back and held one of his arms out to try to further protect his sister.

"Kidnapping is a strong word, I would say, 'borrowed'." the man was still laughing, he had this menacing presence to him, like he made the room colder as soon as he entered. Juhani didn't have the patience to keep going.

"You stole her. I found her fair and square now let us go." Juhani said as he tried to bargain but he could tell it wouldn't go far. The man kept laughing.

"That's cute, how about you leave the girl here, and then I give you to the count of 5 before I electrocute you. How's that a deal?" the man said, Juhani shook his head no but he could tell that it wasn't a choice, that was the offer and he could choose to take it or leave it.

"1, 2." the man started, Juhani didn't budge, he made his choice, if this was how it was going to be, he wouldn't be able to live if he knew he got so close to saving his sister before failing.

"3, 4." the man continued, Juhani dropped his sword so that less of him would be attracting electricity. Juhani knew it was coming, he could feel the current in the air and his hair was standing on end. The man was leaning on his cane, his fingers had small lightning bolts of energy surging around them, Juhani closed his eyes and braced himself for what would happen next. Except he never heard 5 come, he heard a clunk and then a thud before he opened his eyes, he saw the man on the ground lying seemingly lifeless. He wasn't sure if he was dead or not and he didn't want to find out. Beside him lay a rock bigger than Juhani's own fist. Juhani was confused until he looked up and saw Isamu standing in the doorway. Juhani was shocked, but he felt gratitude rushing over him. He was about to be fried, but he was saved at the last second by the person he least expected. Juhani's jaw was dropped, and it was silent until Isamu spoke.

"Not today," Isamu said before kicking the body in front of him.

"Is he dead?" was the only thing that Juhani was able to think of to say, no thank you, not you saved my life, he wanted to know what happened.

“Probably not, but he won’t be causing any trouble for a while.” Isamu said, he seemed pretty pleased with himself in how his stupid rock took out a dangerous person.

“You threw a rock at him? Wait, who even is he?” Juhani asked, so much happened so fast that he was having trouble putting it all together.

“He is the guy who’s running the Damnation, and a rock because I can’t use my bow and it gets the job done,” Isamu explained, Juhani was still in shock.

“If he’s the leader then why would you have not killed him or taken him hostage or something?” Juhani asked, Isamu had to admit it was a valid question, there was one good reason that Isamu had thought.

“We don’t have the facilities to keep him detained for long. Even if we did though, if he wasn’t there to command the Damnation, the fear is that someone worse than him would take his place. We would prefer to deal with the evil we already know than deal with the evil we don’t know.” Isamu said. Juhani at this point decided that it would be a good time to ask how to signal to everyone a mission was complete.

“How do I let everyone know we’re okay to go home now?” Juhani asked. Isamu nodded and pointed to Juhani’s wristband.

“Tap it five times fast and it’ll let everyone know they can go home. Wait home?” Isamu asked while Juhani followed the instructions, shortly after soldiers started to trickle out from the hallways.

“Yeah, home. I changed my mind, I’m not taking Lilja back to the Laplands, I think I could see us finding a family here.” Juhani said, Lilja looked confused.

“What do you mean Laplands?” She asked, Juhani shook his head.



“Don’t worry about it. I think we found our place now. We don’t have to go back up North.” Juhani said, Lilja smiled.

“Good, I don’t like the cold,” Lilja said. Juhani laughed a little bit.

“Neither do I, let’s go now,” Juhani said as he led them all out. It was unknown what danger the future might hold, but with his newfound family, maybe they would be able to get through it.