



DEPARTMENT:

FACULTY SPONSOR:

STUDENT(S):

PROJECT TITLE:

Alone

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Trees crack and branches break with great speed. He's moving too fast to acknowledge the pain, his mind racing. Isaac is in the race of his life. One step after another he picks up pace, jumping over logs and fallen-over debris not to interrupt his escape. His gas mask is fogging up due to the excessive exhalation of his breath, trying not to grow tired from being out of breath. The clunky backpack is heavy and weighing him down. His veins and lungs are pumping in ultra-drive, his flight instinct in berserk. With each branch break he receives a new scratch and cut that will need to be bandaged up later with his limited resources. Isaac tries to be more meticulous and avoid too much damage, but he hears his pursuer closing in. Behind him, it follows, roughly six feet tall with decaying skin and fur. It runs on all fours, pursuing him. What once resembled a wolf, now drastically plagued and infected. Its face now extended forward revealing torn skin and enhanced sharp teeth. The eyes are bright gold with vertical slits of coal black death. Its instincts are that of Isaac's: survival. Although, this beast cares more in eating an easy meal more than anything else, Isaac's is just to get the hell out of there.

He picks up the pace even more, noticing to his left a run-down cabin; this is his only chance. Breaking stride he makes a B-line for the cabin, the creature following suit. Isaac busts open the door with his shoulder and quickly closes it behind him, throwing whatever he could find in front of the door. "Ah shit, come on." Isaac curses out of breath. There isn't much inside the cabin but there is a shelf-less towering bookcase. This will be his barricade, his only

protection. As he slides it in front of the door, his mind wonders for a second at the color, a beautiful red oak not unlike the one he used to have in his room, but as quickly as that thought comes he pushes it aside and continues barricading the door. The creature suddenly runs full force into the door, making the bookless bookcase move slightly. "Jesus Christ!" he shouts at the door, stumbling backwards landing on his ass. Isaac quickly unfastens his buckles on his backpack to set it in front of him, any extra protection is better than none. He unclips his holstered sheath to grab his gun. He removes the clip and looks at his bullets remaining. Short on ammo, he realizes he has to make every shot count. "Okay I got this. This is fine." He reassures himself as he reinserts the clip, cocks the gun back, and loads a round in the chamber.

The creature isn't stopping anytime soon and keeps attacking the door more and more till finally it caves, knocking over the bookshelf with a loud thud. Isaac is ready. His Rock Island 1911 45. caliber handgun is loaded and aiming straight at it. Now that his first line of defense has been destroyed the wolf slowly lurks in and places its massive paws on tumbled bookshelf. Its first step breaks into the shelf but it does not break its dead eyed lock on Isaac. It hunches down and gives out a guttural growl then lunges at Isaac. To him time slows down and he feels every millisecond as the beast propels itself to him through the air. His heart is no longer beating a million miles a second; it's slow and laborious as if he is already dead. He shoots 8 times at the creature; all shots connecting into its head and thick chest. The wolf hybrid falls inches in front of Isaac's backpack. Isaac stays focused and amplified on the creature watching its last breath leave its body, not for a second taking his eyes off it. Gun still aimed on it, finger on the trigger Isaac pushes it with his foot once. Then again. Then tries kicking it. It is dead as dead can be and not getting back up anytime soon. "Holy shit," Isaac says. With a sigh of relief, Isaac lowers the

gun, holsters it, and puts his head between his knees, exhaling one last shaky labored breath. His only moment of relaxation all morning.

He examines the corpse and notices scars around its massive head, scars from other wolves it looks like. A thought crosses his mind that wolves always hunt in packs, but this one targeted him alone. This could mean only two things: One, it was a lone wolf kicked out of its pack and the scars were wounds of a battle it did not win, forcing it to wander alone. Or two, there are more out there and close too. His fears come to light when his short-lived relaxation ends. In the distance he hears a howl, then another. It is the rest of the pack, trying to find their lost comrade. He quickly gets up, straps on his backpack, and runs out the doorway taking one last look at the fallen beast and that red-oaked bookcase. He isn't wasting a second for them to come find him and worst of all, their dead companion. After gaining a good distance from the corpse, Isaac listens for the wolves' howls, but they are barely audible. This allows Isaac to slow his pace and let his mind wander while heading home.

He is heading towards his safehouse on the outskirts of the forest. It is in a little hut that his family used to own before everything went to shit. The hut is no bigger than 600 square feet, about the size of a small studio apartment. It is a redwood oak color on the outside with some obvious wear and tear from years of harsh forest life. The inside is a posh white that his mother insisted on having. "A kind of home away from home," she would always say. She loved the color and the contrast. "There is nothing like clean polished white to counter the dark dirty woods," she would always chuckle to them when they were young with such a big smile. God, how he missed her. The furniture and appliances inside are semi-modern, white of course. There is a white leather couch that is as comfortable as all get out despite its rigid appearance. As well there is a stainless-steel microwave, a fridge, a dishwasher, and a washer/dryer combo, all of

course do not run anymore because there is no more power in the cabin. Luckily though they still all serve a purpose to Isaac that are key towards his survival.

The hut still has running water surprisingly because it is connected to a local stream that his father had set up 12 summers ago. He makes sure, however, to purify and boil the water before consuming it to avoid risk of infection; even if it is from a fresh stream he doesn't want to take any chances. The hut also has a small twin-sized bed, where Isaac sleeps, with a T.V. in front of it. Sometimes he just lies there in front of the T.V. and just imagines as if something is playing. It helps keep his mind occupied and not dwelling on the past and overthinking things too much. Anything to save a man's sanity, right? There is also a newly installed brick fireplace that he helped put in with his dad no more than six months ago before the outbreak. His dad always loved brick and since the rest of the cabin was to mom's standards, dad decided this fireplace would be his. Isaac remembers the fun they had building the thing; each brick was another smile and laugh that they both shared together. Every time he lit a fire, he would think of just how proud his dad would be of him for doing all of this. Most the time, Isaac just lights a fire in the fireplace for light and heat, but there are candles and flashlights scattered about to help him feel more secure in the encompassing darkness of night. He only lights the candles and fireplace late at night if need be; he doesn't want to draw attention to himself especially at night when the predators are more active. Isaac breaks from the tree line and sees his savior in sight, even seeing it for the thousandth time he is still amazed with its beauty. Upon approaching his home, he feels a large weight removed from his shoulders. Every time he sees this place he thinks of his family and feels safe in this crazy new world. He sighs deeply. Finally, he can relax for a second and go over his supplies and the new supplies he claimed on his scouting expedition to the south.

He unlocks the door to the cabin with a key that he keeps inside a turtle decoration his youngest sister “had to have” at a garage sale some time ago. Picking up the turtle always makes him smile and think of all the laughs they would share and the wonderful play time he’d never relive again. Turtle in hand, he looks towards the woods just 20 yards from the cabin where there is a stack of rocks and a tiny makeshift cross made out of twigs and twine. He smiles mournfully and takes the key out of the turtle and gently sets it down on the ground where he always leaves it, gently patting its head as he comes back up.

Isaac first shuts the door and latches it, next he takes off his gas mask and wipes the eyes to get rid of any perspiration. It is still unclear to him if the gas mask is even needed, but it makes him feel better having it on while outside than not. If he were to get sick like everyone else, he would have already done it by now so the idea that he is immune resurfaces in his mind from a late night family discussion. Next, he unstraps his heavy backpack and begins unloading and sorting. He starts with his ammo count. It is already very low and after this encounter he is down to 22 rounds, two and a half clips, for his pistol. This gun is his survival tool and his best, most versatile defense; the thought of being out of bullets scares him to death. He stays optimistic as he pushes that thought to the back of his mind. Sure, he can find more bullets on one of his excursions into the city or a shop that hasn’t already been looted, but what if he can’t?

He continues looking through his bag and the supplies. Next, are bandages and cloth products. The bandages are the classic Band-Aid brand coming in all different shapes and sizes. The cloth product is just torn pieces of cloth that he has been stockpiling from fabric that he finds on adventures out. They come in handy to quickly stop bleeding and with some alcohol disinfect heal the wound pretty quickly. It’s nice, too, because you can find materials for it anywhere, that’s why he has a whole pile of random assorted clothing in the closet of his cabin in case he

ever needs to restock his supply. So, he is still in good standing with these materials and decides now is the best time to tend to his wounds from the chase. Tearing small fragments of the cloth, he carefully applies them to his injuries with an ample amount of rubbing alcohol. Slowly and methodically he begins cleaning and covering them all from top to bottom, his arms being the worst. His arms have two long slashes in both of them that sting and burn. He must have gotten sap in them while rushing through the thick trees. There are also little minor cuts and scrapes that he just doses with the alcohol and calls it good, no sense on wasting the materials even if he has a plethora of them. The large ones, however, he could have left them unattended, but with the conditions outside growing worse and worse every day he doesn't want to take any chances.

After mending himself, he moves on and dumps the remaining contents out of his bag. This trip is a food hunt, and he found some wild goods. Mushrooms, plump and ripe, are plentiful. He found a stockpile of them in heaps, making sure to pick only the ripest ones and leave a trail back to the spot so he could get more when the time is right. Next are berries. He found a large cache of multicolored ones all strewn about. Some are on the ground and others on the bushes and trees. Isaac isn't an expert, however, on knowing which berries are safe to eat and those that are not. He luckily has a small handbook that clarifies all the berry types in the Colorado area that are edible and those to stay away from. This is another essential in survival, partially because it is called the *Nature Survival Handbook*, but the author's name was faded out long ago from the looks of it. He found this handbook when he was younger at a garage sale years ago, he begged and pleaded with his mom to get it for him because "it looked cool." Little did he know this "cool" looking book would be his savior. Every time he picks it up, he thanks his mom for paying the hefty ten bucks and buying it for him. He remembers what she said too, "Hunk of junk, honey. When are you ever going to use something like that?" This makes his face

go red and he smiles a big smile, tears welling up in his eyes. Then he clears his throat and inhales deeply to pull back the tears. Thanks to the book he sorts the red berries into a pile of edible ones, the blue and black ones into a pile edible when boiled and cooked, and the yellow into a pile of other toxic and possibly lethal berries.

The toxic pile has been growing for quite some time and he's always telling himself he will throw them out and get rid of them, but something deep down prevents him from doing that. Maybe he plans on using it for something that he doesn't even quite know yet? Or maybe he keeps them as an escape... when things get too crazy to handle anymore, an easy way out. He shudders after putting the lethal berries in their designated pile and then continues to the contents of his bag counting and sharpening his knives and cleaning off the edible berries and mushrooms. Once the bag is emptied, and the supplies are properly cleaned and stored, he lights a fire in the cabin's brick fireplace to stay warm and sprawls out in front of it to ease his sore muscles. He has earned this and decides to reward himself with a much-needed break.

It all started with a virus. Small at first but that changed quickly. People didn't think much of it at first. It started with the most common of symptoms: stomachache, coughing, vomiting, and so on. Common cold stuff or flu-like symptoms. The children were the first to get it. Uncontrolled vomiting at school, but everyone thought it must be a stomach bug that was going around and would end pretty quickly. It didn't. They tried different medicines and treatments to cure the infected, but nothing seemed to help. First, one school shut down because of the number of sick students. Then a second, a third, a fourth. The desensitization crews were working on overdrive trying to purge the spread, but it didn't help. By the end of the week almost all the schools in his area were closed. Only a few were still open, but it was mostly faculty; no one wanted to risk sending their kids and have them suffer the way the infected kids

were. By the second week, the schools had officially become closed and “shut down until further notice.”

It was scary and people were getting worried about what was going on. “A really bad illness,” the news would say. By the end of the second week, offices and businesses were starting to close because the spread was becoming uncontrollable. It happened because the parents of the sick kids had to go to work still and they didn’t realize how spreadable it was. They were infected and yes, spreading it to their businesses and coworkers and, worse of all, the customers. The more sick parents meant the more sick people at their works, and wiping their diseased hands on items other people would touch, which meant more sick people all over. It was an epidemic at this point and the number of sick people skyrocketed. The second week was the scariest for many because this was the moment people realized it wasn’t just a virus or something that could easily be fixed with modern medicine and over the counter products. The third week came and radio stations and tv stations stopped airing regular scheduled programs. That meant no more cartoons for the kids, no more HGTV, or reruns of shows most watch on Netflix now. Only news stations were still active, letting people know the condition of the nation. That’s right, the nation. It was spreading to more than just Isaac’s small town, it was going nationwide. Maybe worldwide? No one actually knew. Isaac was too focused on staying healthy.

A loud bang wakes Isaac from his nap; he must have dozed off while resting by the fire. “Shit!” he says out loud, confused on how long he slept for. In the woods many noises can be heard, trees falling, birds chirping, animals breeding and dying, so it is no surprise he heard something. Except this noise is not like anything he has heard before, this is new... and close. Silence grows as Isaac looks in all directions of his windowless hut. Shortly after this all started, he boarded up all windows to make sure nothing can get in besides him. There are only two ways

in and out of the cabin, the front door and a hidden door in the back that was latched up tight.

Another bang breaks the silence from the opposite side of the cabin. Then another to the side he is on by the fire.

Footsteps can be heard pacing back and forth outside from all directions now. Nails clicking on the red gravel that outlines the hut, something Isaac's dad thought would look good for an isolated hut in the woods. Now all Isaac can picture is the red gravel symbolizing blood and death. The footsteps become more frantic and the banging increases in frequency. Isaac stays quiet, trying not to make his presence known from the unknown assailants. Finally, the noises stop, and nothing is heard. He slowly gets up from his position on the floor and makes his way to the door. Carefully, he peaks his head out. It is just becoming night and the sun is still just barely gleaming on the woods. The pink sunset colors are eerie and unsettling because they are showing a dense fog growing in around him. He sees nothing. No creatures, or little animals wandering around, not even birds soaring through the trees. No sign of whatever is causing his torment. Feeling unsafe and unsure of what has happened, he refuses to go outside, call it gut instincts. Instead, he has the idea to throw a mushroom outside to see if anything stirs. If nothing happens, he can just go out and reclaim his bounty. He grabs the smallest one he can find in his kitchen and goes back to the door. Opening the door just enough to squeeze his hand through, he throws the mushroom.

In a second, three wolves descend upon the mushroom. Two were on the roof waiting to pounce and a third was in the woods. He quickly slams the door and bolts it shut, knowing that it won't do much good. He then dives for his gun and loads a full clip into the chamber. It is a trap, and he is the scared rabbit in the net. These wolves are the same as the earlier one and probably are from the same pack. They must have smelled the other wolf's scent on Isaac's boots after he

kicked it and they tracked him to his, now, not so safe house. So many thoughts are running through his mind. He has never fought this many at one time of anything except maybe those damn infected spiders that are ten times the size of a tarantula. But these aren't cat-sized spiders you can still step on. These are huge infected wolves. The wolves take heed of the door closing and begin their assault. One after another, they lunge at the blocked entrance trying to wear it down. They are determined to get inside and aren't stopping anytime soon. Isaac has the gun aimed at the door and flinches with each barrage, fearing this one would be the one.

Suddenly, a roar interrupts the assault. This roar is deep and guttural and unlike anything he has ever heard before. The banging stops, and growls are heard out front of the door. One of the wolves starts barking and howling, but they aren't looking at the door anymore; they are focusing on something else, something bigger. The howls and growls turn into snarls and teeth gnash as if preparing for a different attack. It sounds like one wolf lunges forward with great force against the new threat, just to be thrown against the side of the hut with a light whimper and then silence. The other two wolves growl and snarl and then attack as well. At this time, Isaac runs to the door, still too afraid to see what is going on outside. He listens with his ear to the door, focusing all his attention on what is happening outside. A ripping and tearing sound is heard with another dog cry. A wolf is then heard howling a sad howl and retreating into the woods with great speed. Then that great roar is heard again and the ground shakes from the sheer force of this massive roar. Isaac hears foot stomps retreat into the woods and then silence once more.