

The yellow school bus wound along the picturesque mountain road, ending the natural silence with the clamor of unruly teenagers.

Two homerooms worth of high school students were packed tight in the extra-long bus, chattering away as the mountain sunshine rained in from the east. Hidden at times behind the peaks, while radiant and vivid when they passed through a valley, the sun was like a beautiful reminder of the purity of the world. The air was full of early spring scents and the call of local birds.

Adam Pristol sat over the rear wheel, a half-smile on his face as he watched the side of the road. He tried to spy between the trees of the thick woods that covered the mountains, hoping to lay eyes on deer or wild rabbit or some other wildlife. All he was seeing thus far was the mid-morning light showering between branches, dusty motes floating in the golden beams.

Laughter got Adam's attention and he looked back a few seats, towards the rear of the bus. Jennifer Romaine was sitting with another girl (whom Adam knew but couldn't be bothered to recognize). All that mattered was, as the bus turned, following the curve of the road, golden light filtered in through the windows behind Jennifer's impossibly beautiful head and her light brown hair lit up and her eyes seemed to glow. Everything about the girl was radiant, but now it was like even the heavens confirmed her perfection.

Adam's admiration of Jennifer was cut short when Crystal slipped over from her seat. "Shut your mouth, dork. You're drooling."

"No, I'm...am not..." Adam's certainty didn't keep him from checking his jaw. He faced forward and sat through the rush of just seeing Jennifer.

Crystal watched him practically vibrate for a moment on the high of his crush and just shook her head. "Are you ever going to ask her out?"

"No," Adam said glumly. He suddenly perked up. "Why? You know what she'd say?"

"No," Crystal said with absolute certainty. Adam glowered at her. "That's why I want you to go ahead and do it and get it over with." The bus turned and they both grabbed onto the seat in front of them to keep from being thrown in the dark gray bench seats. "Besides, I'm hoping you'll go after one of the guys on the soccer team or something. Maybe somebody on the baseball team and it can be a forbidden intra-mural love affair." Crystal swooned for a moment, then griped, "That way you can be a proper gay friend."

"I'm not gay," Adam defended disinterestedly.

"Pssh," Crystal dismissed. "Details." She looked haughty at him. "It isn't all about you, you know?" she teased with a serious look. "Take one for the team, will ya?"

"You're a pervert," Adam chastised her.

"So the yaoi fan boards keep telling me," Crystal said with pride.

The bus rumbled on into the sun, heading farther up the mountain pass into the morning.

Deep in the woods, a monster walked.

On heavy misshapen hooves, the giant furry beast stalked between the trees. Mighty claws ripped the trees unthinkingly as the heavy beast stumbled forward, snarling at its own weakness. With a heavy armored back like an armadillo but the mass of a bear on a scale never before seen, the enormous animal slowly shuttered down the ravine between two peaks in the mountain range. It slowed and stared into the distance, seeing a small spot of civilization between the mountains: a small construction site amongst otherwise untouched forests continuing out of sight.

The spring morning's breeze carried with it the scent of humans. The instant the giant beast caught whiff of the familiar odor, it snarled. Rage caused it to growl, its mouth full of teeth bristling with rage. It roared into the sky, a promise of slaughter. It began to hunt after the scent and its originators, heading after that which made its blood boil.

Just passed the new construction site on the left, the school bus pulled off the narrow highway down a poorly marked side road. The path was little more than two worn stretches of muddy ground between two veritable walls of mountain trees on either side. Looking out the window at the dense forest just inches from his window, Adam teased Crystal, saying, "You know, this is how horror movies start."

"Yeah, and dirty movies too," Crystal said gleefully.

Adam looked appalled at her. "We're kids in a school bus!" he shrieked in horror. She immediately began naming off relevant hentai series, causing him to smack her arm in disgust. She bit her tongue at him.

The yellow bus slowly negotiated the seemingly-improvised road for a while until it came to a large gravel plot. The bus pulled around a flag pole and came to a stop before a small cloister of log cabins. The grass around the cabins was exceptionally well-maintained, as were the flower beds at the

entrance to each cabin. Of the four cabins, one looked like a regular a-frame cabin, while the other with the sign 'visitor's center' painted over the door, looked like an elaborate parody of a cabin. Two more cabins sat behind the first two, looking more like storage shacks than residences.

Out from the central cabin, a giant two-story affair with big windows that could in no way be energy efficient, came striding a park ranger. Dressed in a long sleeve jacket and unnecessarily short shorts, he adjusted his ranger's hat and then walked down the steps with a confident, exaggerated swagger. "Welcome, kids!" he called in a booming, deep voice. "Welcome, to the forest!"

Off the bus came the class teacher and sole chaperone, Mr. Allman. He flapped his sweater vest in the spring heat and stepped off the bus. "Ranger Mike," he said with a wave. He hopped down and shook the ranger's hand, then surreptitiously wiped off the bronzer that had transferred. The high school kids disembarked off the bus and gathered around Mr. Allman.

"Now, kids," said the parker ranger, clearly used to talking to elementary school kids and not blossoming adults. "These woods here can be wonderful, full of glorious beauty like nothing you can imagine, placed here by the god lord for the benefit and bounty of mankind." The crowd of teens all looked warily at one another, but nobody said anything. "But these woods can also be dangerous if you aren't a seasoned woodsman," he continued. "You kids make sure to keep an eye out for any wildlife. I know a mountain lion might look like a cute and cuddly kitty-cat but in actuality, it's a fearsome man-eating monster. You understand me?" The class gave back a chorus of the most bored, inattentive 'okay' ever heard by human ears.

Mr. Allman watched Ranger Mike out of the corner of his eye, as if counting the number of times he said 'man'. When the ranger was done, the teacher stepped forward. "Alright, class, you all know why we're here. Everybody's got their worksheets. We're here to examine samples of leaves and local flora. Do not collect local samples, though. Draw a picture and answer the questions as best you can." He looked at the crowd of kids and said, "Okay, stay with your work buddies and let's get started."

"And be careful," added Ranger Mike with a forced, manly tone.

Adam and Crystal looked around at the rest of the class, then at each other and shrugged. They began to walk off together by default, the rest of the class beginning to fracture along social status fault lines and splinter into pairs. As the two friends walked, Crystal checked over her shoulder, then asked Adam, "Want to go ask Jennifer if she wants to be in our group?"

"What, no!" he panicked.

"Fine, I'll go ask her," Crystal told him. Adam's face went white as Crystal walked across the gravel parking area before the cabins. She approached Jennifer without hesitation, the gorgeous goddess of a girl surrounded by other girls. Adam felt like he was going to melt, suffer a heart attack, or both.

Crystal and Jennifer exchanged a few words with Jennifer chuckling. The very sight made Adam's heart soar. Jennifer then turned and looked right at Adam. He immediately had that heart attack he had feared a moment before. Jennifer smiled again and laughed, then clearly told Crystal no.

Adam felt his whole ego shatter. He felt like a pane of stained glass through which a brick had been thrown. His nervous smile melted and the world felt terribly cold. The sun ceased to exist except to illuminate the loneliness and isolation that he knew he would feel for the rest of all life.

Crystal returned to him and said, "She's already got a partner." Adam decided those words needed to be etched on his tombstone as it sat alone in an isolated hill, far removed from all warmth and joy. He turned and tried to walk it off. He nodded sadly as he headed into the woods. "At least she didn't say hell no," Crystal encouraged her friend. It didn't make Adam feel any less like crying.

Heavy cloven steps pressed down the soft mountain earth.

The giant beast growled as it walked, fury carrying it. Its rage was unending and it clawed at its chest as it walked. Madness had taken over its mind completely and all it could see or feel was endless viciousness. It followed the scent of humanity that caused its rage to bubble over, as if snuffing out that scent might calm its fury.

As the heavy hooves stomped, a squirrel scurried down a tree. Curious, it sniffed in the direction of the giant monster.

The huge beast's head snapped around, violent rage overtaking it entirely. It roared and swung at the tree, snapping it in two and causing the upper portion to fall to the ground. The squirrel rode the tree to the ground and then bounded off just before impact, but the giant monster snarled and dove after the tiny creature. With unnatural agility, the huge beast kept pace until the squirrel ran up another tree. The giant slashed at the tree with its huge claws, snapping it indifferently just as it had done the previous mighty form, but the squirrel had already leapt to another tree and was racing into the sun-drenched heights of the canopy above.

The monster roared, berserk. Unable to control itself or satiate its bloodlust, it clawed again at its chest, ripping open skin and dribbling its own blood atop its claws. It shook with rage and staggered again into the distance, following the reviled scent of humans.

The cloister of A-frame cabins were nestled into a tight little ravine. Towards the east was a steep incline, almost like the valley of the ranger's station had been carved out of the very earth. To the west, a more gradual and natural incline joined into the natural roll of the mountains. Both were covered by dense aspens with some pines sprinkled here and there.

Adam and Crystal walked towards the steep incline to the east of the cabins while everybody else went towards the easier west. Adam went right to a small aspen sapling growing straight up next to a practically sheer rock face. "Seems like a poor place to grow," he told Crystal. He began to search the smattering of small underbrush growing around the sapling.

"I don't think trees have much choice in where they grow," Crystal said. She looked back at the other students, most of whom were heading in the other direction. "What about Dale Fastter?" she asked Adam. "He's a cutie. And I bet he'd make a good boyfriend."

"Would you date him?" Adam asked as he used his cell phone as a magnifying glass. He snapped some zoomed-in pictures of a leaf.

"Ugh, no," Crystal blanched.

"Then why would you think I would?" he asked, texting the picture to the teacher and Crystal.

Crystal looked again into the crowd. "I dunno." She checked the text Adam had sent her. "One down, nineteen more to—"

A loud shriek tore through the valley.

Crystal and Adam both whirled around as they saw several of their classmates come running down the far side of the mountain. Two girls were shrieking as they ran, frantic and terrified. They practically threw themselves into the safety of the group. Crystal and Adam both burst into a sprint to join the others, but Adam's soccer legs carried him there in a heartbeat.

"There was a monster!" shrieked Devon Tomlin, pointing with a shaking finger back up at the peak. "I saw it, up there! It was going through the trees and it was huge!" She shrieked hysterically at 'huge'.

"Devon, Devon," Mr. Allman tried to calm her down. The other students were beginning to panic around them, all on the lookout for the

obvious and immediate death which was going to come down upon them at any second and from any direction.

"It was probably just a bear," said Ranger Mike, sauntering over protectively. A thumb stuck in his saucer-sized belt buckle, he started to put an arm around the cringing teenager but Mr. Allman blocked him with a wary glare. Adam noted the park ranger was addressing the group from the other side of the crowd, the majority of the teens between him and the possible bear. He continued, saying in a bold and clearly-practiced voice, "Bears come down from the mountains occasionally. They can be dangerous to most people, but they're not a big deal if you know how to handle them."

Mr. Allman did a doubletake. "Not a big...WHAT?!"

"Yeah, they're nothing to worry about," the park ranger insisted casually. "For someone like me, they're just like big dogs. Not a problem. Certainly nothing you, or your parents, need to worry about."

"Who said parents?" asked Jennifer, holding Devon supportively.

"Who said school board, what?" the park ranger responded defensively. "We don't need to panic or go being all exaggeratory to the wildlife office," the ranger insisted.

"There's a bear up there," Mr. Allman exclaimed.

"If there's a bear, do I get hazard pay?" asked the bus driver with a yawn.

"That was no bear!" Devon insisted hysterically.

"See, there was no bear," the park ranger assured everyone that had paid for the field trip.

"It was bigger than a bear," Devon told everyone. Her absolute certainty drew silence, even from the adults. "I've seen bears," she insisted in no uncertain terms. "My mom and me come up camping here all the time. We've seen bears. This wasn't a bear!" she tried to emphasize. "It was a monster!"

Adam and Crystal glanced at one another with knowing looks. Crystal nodded before she began to step away from the crowd. Likewise, Adam moved in the other direction, heading to the back of the group as inconspicuously as possible. Crystal headed towards where the 'bear' had been sighted. She moved around the bus, away from the crowd, and went halfway to the treeline, all while Mr. Allman and the park ranger argued about just how dangerous bears were and why the National Wildlife Service didn't need to be bothered with such a trivial matter.

Crystal waited until Adam was inching far enough away from the crowd so as to be noticed and she pointed up into the treeline, deep atop the mountain. "There it is!" she shrieked like a damsel out of an old horror movie and promptly fainted with equal drama. The other students all ran around her. She feigned unconsciousness until one of the boys called for her to get mouth-to-mouth when she promptly made a miraculous recovery.

As Crystal drew the attention of everyone else, Adam sprinted towards the cabins. Disappearing behind the buildings, he kept running and rushed towards the large tree that towered over the others in the spacious ravine. He checked over his shoulder and, safely hidden from the view of the other teens, he erupted into a full sprint. Racing right at the three, Adam called, "GoTree awaken!" right as he leapt into the tree.

GoTree vaulted out from the other side of the giant tree, landing in a crouch. The armored giant remained low as it listened for the sounds of students and animals alike. Freed of the constraints of human hearing, GoTree drew in the sounds of all life nearby, hearing both above and below the register of the human ear as well as with a delicacy and sensitivity that surpassed most animals. The blue and green knight heard the trees respire and the animals scurry about. He heard the heartbeats of the kids as well as the settling of the bus engine as it cooled from the drive.

And he heard the stomps of the distant beast.

Far too large to be anything native to the forest, the steps were too wide and too heavy to be anything of the natural world. The blue and green armored knight rose from the crouch. Standing over twice as tall as any human, his body was made of heavy wood that was practically petrified in its density. Large shoulders like pauldrons and heavily armored forearms and shins like gauntlets and bracers, the knight was made of sharp angles and a fearsome form. Its head was like an enclosed helmet, complete with an angular visor from within which glowed two green eyes.

GoTree ran up the ravine, trusting to speed and the obfuscation of the trees to hide his ascent. Among the kids, Crystal looked into the distance and saw only a glimpse of the knight racing towards the mountain top. She feigned another fainting spell, ensuring the attention was drawn away.

GoTree arrived at the peak and turned this way and that. Almost as tall as many of the trees, the armored giant saw nothing out of place at first. Even with his hearing, GoTree struggled to identify where the stomping was coming from. Atop the peak, he saw nothing but more trees stretched out for as far as the eye could see towards the east and north. The town was southeast but almost an hour away.

GoTree turned and looked towards the west and noticed the construction site. An uneasy feeling crept in him and he began to dart amongst the trees, heading towards it. He didn't go far before he saw the indentations in the ground before him; hoof prints, like those of a horse but much larger. Once he'd seen the first, he began to spot more, all of them leading towards the construction site.

Then he heard the explosion.

It was little more than a loud, powerful pop but it blew the leaves back like a sudden cloudburst on a cloudless day. GoTree rose, resolving himself. He broke into a run, darting between the trees, brushing back the leaves with his speed. He arrived at the edge of the mountain and looked down across the road. The construction site stood out against the green of the spring mountainside. The first structures were still going up, but GoTree could spot a truck that had been overturned.

In the valley, all the kids spun towards the explosion. Many ducked and more than a few screamed. Crystal turned in worry and searched for some sign of GoTree but saw nothing. "Come on, kids!" Mr. Allman yelled, trying to gather the panicking crowd. "Back on the bus!" he yelled, trying his best to usher them back into the long yellow safety.

Atop the mountain, the armored knight knelt down and then vaulted into the air. He sailed across the highway and landed in the woods north of the construction site with barely a sound despite his great size. He approached the artifice cautiously, listening and hearing the growing din of chaotic destruction.

GoTree came to the fence surrounding the construction site, or what was left of it. Chain link strips were all that remained of the previously-imposing barricade. Poles had been ripped from the ground and tossed aside so the corners of the site looked like tangled metal brambles. The white gravel ground reflected the morning heat and the hum of electricity filled the air.

GoTree approached an office trailer, staying close to it to avoid detection. There was a deep growl from the far side of the site, followed by a transformer frame being thrown through the air. GoTree stepped out from behind the trailer to see the giant beast. A tall, hulking monster, it looked like an armored bear. Thick, leather plates covered inconsistent patches of its body, like a shedding armadillo. It stood on hooves like a horse and its mouth was bristling with too many teeth arranged without order in its mouth. The beast seemed to pick up GoTree's scent and it turned with surprising speed. It snarled at the knight and its huge leathery back bristled.

GoTree held up its hands, both to be calming but also ready to defend if it came to it. The beast snarled loudly, its teeth literally shaking from the force of its rage. Slobber like it was starved for violence dropped from snout as it stomped towards GoTree. GoTree didn't engage but quietly sidestepped, making the monster turn counterclockwise to keep fixated on the giant.

The beast swung suddenly at GoTree, lashing out with far greater speed and reach than GoTree was ready for. The fierce slash slammed GoTree across the head and knocked the giant down onto its knees. The wild monster went berserk and began to bite and swing at GoTree with reckless abandon. The knight rolled away but the giant bear followed furiously, slamming GoTree hard with any and every strike it could.

GoTree rolled into the fencing that ran along the perimeter of the site and the bear, pinning him against it, began swatting wildly down at him. The pounding echoed into the forest around them, sounding like bone striking metal. Every strike knocked away chips and chunks of armor, falling onto the gravel as splinters and fragments of wood.

The instant the bear drew up from its bombardment, however, GoTree kicked it in the midsection. The powerful blow knocked the bear back a step, giving GoTree the room to rise to his feet. The bear roared and swung again, but GoTree kicked the swing out of the air and followed with a kick to the head that knocked the bear off its feet.

With agility born of madness, the bear rose, this time on all fours. It bellowed angrily as if from some deep chasm within its mighty body before charging at GoTree. The knight leapt over the bear and let the mad beast tear through the fence. Out onto the grass, the bear turned and rose again on its hind legs. Despite GoTree's great height, even he was dwarfed before the armored bear.

Across the valley, the class of high school kids watched as roars and the sounds of vicious, inhuman fighting filled the mountain air. Mr. Allman tried to hurry people back to the buses but the students stood transfixed as they listened to the sounds of a distant and epic battle. Jennifer joined the effort to drive others towards the bus, while Crystal looked in the distance towards the construction site, able to imagine the carnage.

GoTree readied for a further fight and he got one. The bear lunged at him again, its powerful arms covering more distance than seemed physically possible. The bear smacked him down to the ground again and climbed atop the armored giant. It bit GoTree on the back of the neck and began to fling its jaws left and right, trying to rip GoTree's head from his shoulders.

Rather than be flung around like a ragdoll, GoTree clapped both his hands behind his head, boxing the bear's ears. The bear didn't release its bite but it stopped shaking its head. With this second's reprieve, GoTree got his legs beneath him and stood, lifting the bear into the air. The giant monster stabbed both its claws into GoTree's side but the knight carried through by rolling forward, slamming the bear face-first into the gravel.

The bear went flying forward and slammed on its back, sending out a spray of gravel in all directions like bullets fired indiscriminately. GoTree, meanwhile, sprang back up to its feet. The bear seemed undaunted. It rolled onto all fours and bellowed again at GoTree. The giant backed away from his foe, searching quickly for an alternative to the continued fight. As he looked away, the bear charged GoTree and slammed into him.

GoTree was thrown into an incomplete power converter, rending metal and sending pieces crashing in all directions. The giant crashed hard and the bear climbed atop him once again. Pinning GoTree to the ground, the bear began to gnaw at the knight's armored face, roaring furiously as it did, frothing at the mouth in utter rage.

GoTree boxed the bear's ears again, but it earned him nothing but the bear pinning his arms to the ground with its front paws. It roared again and bit deep enough into GoTree's head that the sound of wooden snapping began to echo across the construction site.

Desperate, GoTree bucked for all he was worth. He popped his hips up against the bear's impossibly dense body, forcing the heavy monster to release his face so as to maintain the dominant position. Giving GoTree the space, the knight rolled suddenly and flipped the bear onto its back. Pinning the bear now, GoTree leapt up and backed away defensively. The giant beast gathered itself up, growling with hate. GoTree backed away until the bear roared again. Sending gravel scattering, GoTree turned and ran.

The bear chased after him, charging into the woods, roaring the whole way. GoTree managed a slight lead as he dashed down the grassy slope of the mountainside. Looking for options, he opted to race directly at the largest tree he could see. At a full sprint and with the bear closing in on him, GoTree leapt right at the tree, disappearing into the bark like he'd stepped through a doorway. The bear, unable to process what had happened, slammed face-first into the tree and came to a sudden stop. The top of the towering tree shook, knocking leaves free and sending a few birds complaining into the sky.

The instant GoTree disappeared into the tree, he leapt out of another tree a dozen yards away. He landed in a crouch, fully renewed. All the scars and broken edges of his armor were restored and the cracked

faceplate of his helmet looked like new. The bear, disoriented from the impact and the disappearance shook off the collision and sniffed the air. Catching GoTree's scent, it turned towards him and rose onto its abnormally thick legs. It snarled, spittle flying from its bristling teeth. GoTree glanced ahead at the construction site, then over his shoulder at the bear. The instant the bear moved, GoTree burst into a run.

GoTree made it to the gravel of the construction site and grabbed up a piece of the power converter he'd been thrown into moments before. He whirled around and, with the full force of his spin, smacked the bear across the face with the metal component. He hit hard and knocked the bear practically off its feet. It stumbled and tried to regain itself but was clearly dazed. GoTree tried to follow-up and slam the bear atop the head but the monster's armored hull broke the metal, snapping it at impact. The second blow seemed to have little effect on the bear because it smacked GoTree again and knocked him away.

The armored giant fell hard into a collection of steel girders, knocking them about. GoTree backed away from the bear, only to feel an I-beam at his side. The bear roared and charged and GoTree, moving faster than thinking, hoisted the I-beam straight up at the bear. The beast, so intent on smiting GoTree, impaled itself on the metal bar he'd extended.

The giant monster howled in madness as it was run through. The I-beam ruptured from the back, splattering blood and innards across the construction site. It snarled right at GoTree, it's tooth-saturated jaw just inches from the knight's armored face. Then it lost all energy. Suddenly, it's jaw drew limp. For only a second, the bear's eyes lost all madness and were the eyes of a docile animal. It looked right at GoTree and whimpered once before it went entirely and eternally still.

GoTree released the I-beam and the giant bear fell to the ground, completely motionless. GoTree scrambled to his feet and backed away from the corpse. He waited for some movement but all that happened was a breeze came down through the mountain pass, drowning out the nearby bird calls. In a strange shock, the giant knight nudged the bear with its toe, as if unable to understand the sudden lack of a response. When the bear still didn't move, GoTree knelt over it. The giant put his mighty hands atop his own head, slowly grasping the realization of the bear's death. Around him, the morning had grown still, the rustle of the mountain forest the only movement.

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Crystal looked down at the trauma report and tried to understand the questions she was reading. Back at school, both classes on the field trip had been shuttled directly into the cafeteria where they were now filling out a pre-therapy report that was mandatory any time there was an incident that took place during school hours. Crystal had done this more than once before, for everything from a fight between students to the fire alarm getting pulled. Filling it for a monster sighting was, admittedly, a new experience.

As she started to circle which face – on a spectrum from very smiley to very frowny – represented how she felt in the wake of events, Adam slipped into the seat next to her. “Where the hell have you been?” Crystal asked without looking up from her sheet. She decided on the slightly frowny face. That usually came with limited therapy but free dessert at lunch.

“I just got back,” Adam whispered, checking around the cafeteria to see if he’d been noticed. The lights overhead were off, but the open space was well-lit by the windows. Everybody had broken into small groups and pairs, gossiping, very little of which seemed to be about the monster. Adam looked about and saw few adults. “Where’s Mr. Allman?”

“Probably smoking a joint behind the gym,” said Crystal as she filled out a short questionnaire about her feelings.

“What, again?” Adam lamented, looking vaguely in that direction.

“Well, he has kinda had a rough day,” Crystal told Adam with a look. Her survey completed, she folded it and then fished some eyedrops from her bookbag. “Did you take care of the monster?” she asked as she set aside her glasses and dribbled the eyedrops in her eyes, letting them overflow to look like tears.

“Yeah,” was all Adam said. He watched Crystal get up and feign quiet sobbing as she took her survey to the front of the room and left it with the county-appointed proctor.

Still in his seat at the distant table in the cafeteria, Adam glanced over to the far side. He saw Jennifer sitting alone. She had her homework laid out on the long lunch tables and she was looking over her answers. Adam tilted his head a bit when he realized a rainbow was forming in the window that, from his vantage, was right by her head. The gleam of the daylight on her long hair made him smile.

He stared, enamored, until several other girls came over and sat down noisily next to Jennifer. As if ashamed of her behavior, she tried to hide her completed homework. She quickly fished out some lip palm, like it had been the real focus of her attention. Adam turned away from her, feeling guilty and unsure why.

Crystal returned to her seat, keeping up the charade of being terrified and irreparably betrayed by the lack of safety on the field trip, until she sat down. She sighed, feeling bored. "It seemed like a rabid dog or something," Adam continued without missing a beat as Crystal wiped false tears from her eyes.

"What was it?" she asked, dabbing at her cheeks with a handkerchief. "Was it like some giant bear or something?"

"It definitely wasn't a bear," he told her with absolute certainty. "Or at least, not like any bear I've ever seen." He struggled for the words. "This thing looked..." His silence got Crystal's attention. He looked at her and just shook his head. "This was a monster." She looked genuinely unsettled. "What happened with you guys?"

Crystal shrugged and took out a Stephen King novel. "After we heard some roaring and what sounded like a vicious brawl..." She eyeballed Adam. "We got loaded back up onto the bus and came back to school." She gestured to all the students in the lunch hall. "We were given the trauma surveys – which you should fill out, ice cream sandwiches at lunch today – and that's about it."

"Oh, word," Adam said with a grin. He slipped out of the bench seat and trotted up to the proctor's desk. The proctor, playing a game on his phone, didn't even notice Adam taking the survey. Adam lingered, feeling like he should make some show of being distraught, but thought better of it. He returned to his seat and accepted Crystal's pen when she offered it. He began to fill out the familiar paperwork, quietly checking to make sure the other students wouldn't overhear. "Did anybody see me?" he asked cautiously.

"Not that I'm aware of," she said, turning a page and reading with her finger. "I feel like they would have mentioned seeing anything remotely like a giant mecha in jungle camouflage."

Adam dove right back into the long-standing debate. "GoTree is not mecha," he said incredulously at her. "And he's not in camouflage," Adam argued less adamantly. "He's green and blue, and he's—"

"An armored giant like something out of an anime," she insisted, clearly more focused on her book.

Adam looked back at her, and she knowingly at him. "Yeah, okay," he surrendered. He went back to his survey. "Do I make them all really frowny, or mix them up?"

"Mix them up, otherwise, they assume it's a cry for attention, or fake," she said.

"Got it, thanks," he said, varying his answers. He started on the questionnaire.

Crystal started reading for a moment, then lowered the book. "What happened when you fought the thing? Like...like what happened?"

Adam checked the others around them, confirming nobody was paying even an iota of attention. He shared quietly, "I tracked it to the new power station they were building. It was just...just tearing stuff up." A thought occurred to him and he suddenly felt guilty. "I didn't even think to check to see if anybody was there. I didn't see anybody," he reasoned. He looked at the window, worried. "There might have been people that were hurt."

"Well, if they were, they've gotten help now," Crystal assured him. "We saw emergency response heading up the mountain about the time we got back to school."

Adam nodded. "Good." He didn't seem convinced it was. "I hope the police find out who made that thing, where it came from."

"This wasn't police," she said. Adam turned to her, confused. "It wasn't police that drove by. It was...I don't know, government maybe? Or maybe one of those labs, like the ones down the mountain a ways?" Adam turned worriedly away. "And what do you mean 'made'?"

Adam just shook his head, unsteady. "This wasn't like any bear or...or any animal I've ever seen. I've lived here my whole life practically. I've seen bears and deer and, and everything." He shook his head and sighed with worry. "This was something else."

"Good thing GoTree was around," Crystal ribbed him. Adam feigned a smile before looking worriedly towards the mountains.